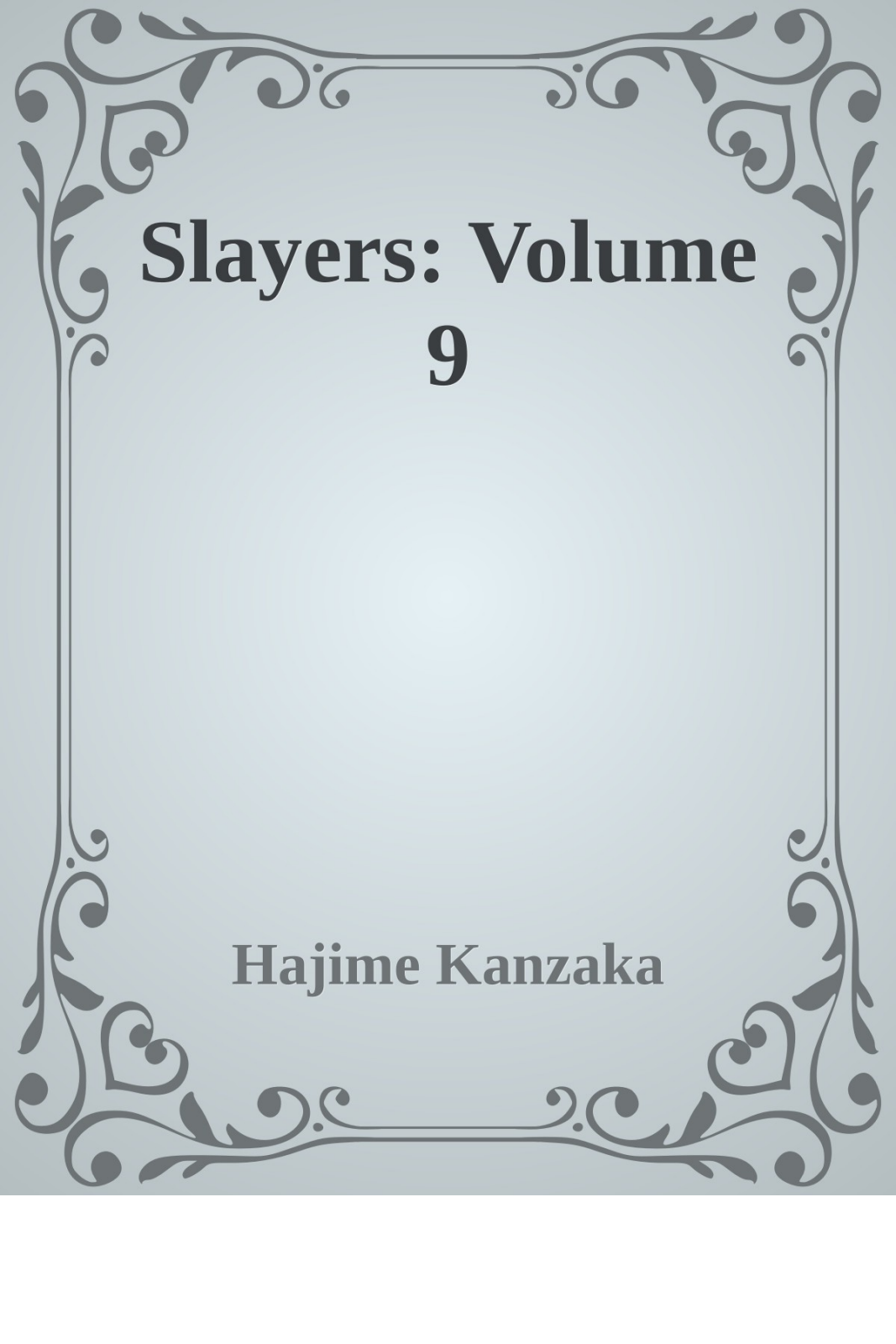


A decorative border with intricate floral and scrollwork patterns, rendered in a light gray color, framing the entire page.

Slayers: Volume 9

Hajime Kanzaka

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1: Magic Sword, Where Art Thou?

Clink.

The sword broke with a high-pitched—and extremely underwhelming—sound.

“Huh?” Gourry remarked in surprise, right as...

“Whaaaat?!” the tour guide shrieked, then promptly laid into us with a mix of anger and dismay. “I beg your pardon! You’re going to have to pay for breaking our legendary sword!”

“You want us to pay for *that*?! What kind of ‘legendary sword’ breaks the second someone bumps into it?!” I barked back.

“Mmgh?!” At this, the man’s face went pale. “That’s, er... That’s part of the legend!”

“The hell it is!”

Kracka-pow! My rage-fueled corkscrew punch slammed hard into the guide’s face.

Ah, legendary weapons. To name just the famous ones, there was the Dark Lord’s Hungry Bone Staff; Ceifeed’s Flare Dragon Sword; the Elemekia Blade, which could cut through astral objects while leaving corporeal ones unscathed; the Blast Sword, which could cleave a deimos dragon... Man, I could go on all day.

That said, about the only magic blades you might come across in the day-to-day were ordinary swords jazzed up with a few jeweled amulets. The honest-to-goodness legendary kind ain’t exactly a dime a dozen.

But *rumors* about them? Now, those things are freakin’ everywhere. You know how it goes. Somewhere sealed away in a cave, stashed in some citadel of evil, held by a nice lady lake spirit until you throw a normal sword in... Yada, yada, yada.

Still, the award for “hoariest legendary sword cliché of all” had to go to the ole stuck-in-a-rock, whoever-pulls-it-out-gets-to-keep-it tall tale. What sucked the most about this particular version was the fact that the boonies were *crawling* with swords stuck in rocks. They were guaranteed to be 100 percent bogus, of course, as someone from a nearby village had usually planted them there.

Why would anyone do that, you ask? Why else? Tourism bucks! Just find yourself some fancy sword, fix it into a rock, and wait for the suckers to roll in. Generally the ringleaders of these little scams were

satisfied with a roundabout upswing in the local sightseeing economy, but the lowest of the low would also charge a fee to see the sword and then a surcharge per tug.

So, no surprise that's exactly the racket Gourry and I had stumbled into in this village.

"Darn it... It's not like they'd bamboozled me into thinking it was *actually* legendary, but still! Really gets my goat that it wasn't just a false rumor, but some village's cheap-ass moneymaking scheme. And that I actually put money into it, even if it was just pocket change..."

After I'd socked out the guide, Gourry and I had returned to town, where I was currently scarfing down a steamed chicken lunch special.

"Hey, no big deal. It's not like we're in a hurry," Gourry responded breezily from across the table as he tore into his salmon sauté.

"Are you kidding me?! This is *your* sword we're replacing, you know?!" I shouted back.

That's right. Gourry and I were presently on a quest to find him a new magical monster-carver. The big lug might be a zero in the brains department, but he turned it up to eleven when it came to swordsmanship. He used to wield the Sword of Light, a kick-ass destroyer o' demons, but he'd ended up losing it in a ruckus that I was kinda-sorta-basically the star of. Hence me currently chasing rumors all over tarnation, trying to find him a replacement.

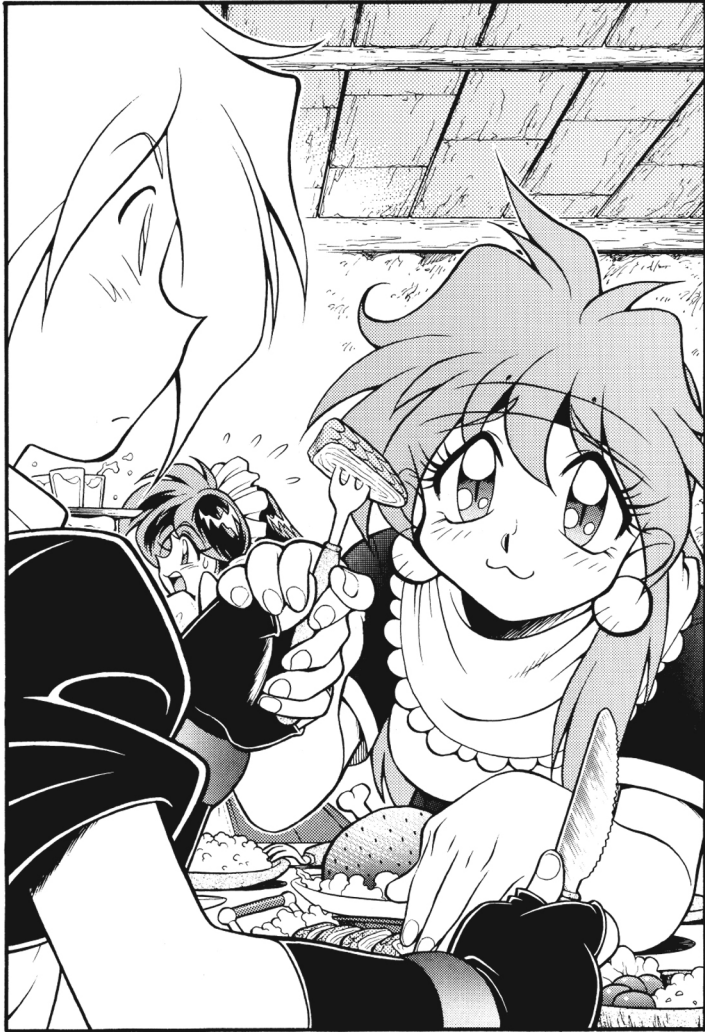
"Even so, Lina... legendary swords don't just grow on trees, right?"

"Exactly. Wouldn't really be legendary if they did."

"But can't I just get by with an ordinary one?"

"How can you say that?!" I reached out and grasped Gourry's fork hand as I gazed up at him with dewy eyes. "You know I think you're an incredible swordsman, Gourry... but that doesn't make you invincible."

As I spoke, I leaned forward and used my free left hand to sneak a few morsels of his salmon sauté onto my plate.



“An ordinary sword would leave you helpless against any ghosts or demons we come across. Besides, you still fight like you have the Sword of Light... and it’s gonna give me a heart attack. Remember when we were fighting that sorcerer the other day and you cooked yourself toast trying to cut through some Flare Arrows with just a sword hilt?”

“Can’t say I do, actually.”

Sheesh... He’d forgotten already?

I let out a momentous sigh, then said, “Point is, I’m not getting a halfway decent night’s sleep until I find you a halfway decent magical sword.”

“But can’t we just buy one instead of going to all this trouble? That magic shop we visited that one time had lots of swords and stuff.”

“C’mon, man. Those are just ordinary swords with talismans or amulets to enhance their edge. About the only supernatural baddies those’ll work on are the crummiest tier of ghosts. They certainly can’t cut through attack spells, and you can bet they won’t do squat against a pure demon. So if we really want to get you a sword worth its salt, we gotta search it out.”

“Don’t they sell ‘swords worth their salt’ in those kinds of shops?”

“Heck no! Even if they got one in stock, some noble or royal type would snatch it up in an instant. If we ever wanna get our mitts on one of those puppies, we’ll have to find it ourselves.”

“I see. Sounds rough.”

“Friendly reminder: this is *your* problem too,” I grumbled, and just then...

“Ooh! There you are!” came a deep voice from the door. I turned and saw an old man standing there alongside the guide I’d punched out in the mountains.

Wonder if they’re here to lecture us about their sword...

The two of them walked briskly up to us, and the old man lowered his voice, as if afraid of being overheard, to say, “Might you two be the ones who made a go at the sword out in the mountains earlier?”

“Yeah, why? Here to give us more grief for breaking your ‘legendary’ blade?” I said in a nasty tone, still smiling.

But the old man smiled right back, his own expression strained but ingratiating. “Perish the thought. Though this *is* related...” There, he took a seat next to me and continued in a hushed voice, “I’m the headman here, and as you can see, our village is very poor. It’s not on the main road, and it doesn’t have any special landmarks. That’s why we had to do it. You understand, don’t you?”

Aha. So he was copping to their “legend” being a fraud. This kinda sob story might work on any normal passerby, but the brilliant sorcerer-slash-swordsman Lina Inverse will never fall for such tripe! Okay, maybe the sorcerer-slash-swordsman bit wasn’t exactly relevant...

“So your village is poor, you say?” I threw back at him. “Yet you seem to be doing pretty well for yourself.”

“Erk?!”

“You got a right healthy glow for your age, and even though your clothes seem plain to the untrained eye, they’re made of quality material. Same goes for your guide there.”

“Geh!”

“Hrk!”

That comment drained the color from both men’s faces. Yep, called it... Five gets you ten these guys were lining their own pockets with the sword scam.

“W-Well, all that aside... we just wanted to refund what you paid to see and pull at the sword,” the headman offered as he produced a small leather purse and placed it on the table.

That’s a little too hefty to be a simple refund... I glared hard at the two of them. “Hang on a minute... this wouldn’t be what those in the business call ‘hush money,’ would it?”

“Er, you see, our village’s reputation would plummet if any... unfortunate... rumors got out, which we’d certainly like to avoid...”

“So you want us to look the other way while you go back to making bank off your hoax?”

“Bwuh! No, of course not! We’d never try that again!” the headman assured me, waving his hands frantically. Of course, the look in his eyes betrayed what he was really thinking: *Crap! She’s onto me!* “B-But this is all the money we have, so... Oh, I know!” he exclaimed, suddenly clapping his hands together. “If you’re still in need of a sword, I happen to know of a *bona fide* legend! I’ll tell you all about it in exchange for your... er, discretion?”

“A *bona fide* legend, eh?” I furrowed my brow at those clearly hollow words. No way was I gonna trust any leads fresh from the mouth of a proven snake oil salesman. “You sure this one’s not phony too?”

“You’d better believe it! Of course, I haven’t been to see the sword myself, but people are really talking about this one!”

“Hmm... Well, let’s have it, I guess.”

“Oh, thank you!” he said, immediately beaming with delight.

“A word of warning, though,” I added, pointing straight at him. “If I think it sounds dodgy... You know where I’m going with this, don’t you?”

“B-But of course!”

“Okay, then spill. Tell me about this so-called legend.”

“All right... If you go east until you hit the main road, then travel four or five days north, you’ll come to a town called Bezeld.”

“Uh-huh.”

“There’s a cave in the mountain there.”

A mountain cave, huh? I was already smelling fish.

“Deep in that cave, there’s a sword stuck into a rock...”

“This tripe again?!”

Ka-crash! My fury-powered fist smote the headman square in the face.

“Darn it... If you’re gonna make up a story, at least be creative about it...”

After I’d beaten the daylights out of the village headman for his lame, lousy lies and taken a huge surcharge out of his hush money offer, Gourry and I left the village in the dust. The sky out was clear and blue, the sunshine nice and warm. The main road was crowded with pedestrians and donkey carts coming and going.

We’d ended up empty-handed in regards to credible leads on magic weapons, but I couldn’t complain about a little good ol’ aimless wandering. Now if only some bandits with a big secret treasure stash would try to make a move on us, we’d be all set.

“Seriously though, what now, Lina?” Gourry asked as a wooded village came into view.

“Good question. I was thinking we oughta head for Bezeld.”

“Bezeld?” Gourry scowled at this. “That name sounds familiar...”

“You know, the town that the village con artist mentioned?”

“Ohh. Yeah, that’s right!” Gourry nodded in understanding, then scowled again. “But didn’t you say that was bogus?”

“I sure did. And it almost certainly is.”

Gourry cocked his head, unable to make sense of what I was saying. The birdsong continued as our conversation came to a silent halt for a time. Eventually, Gourry finally said, “I don’t think I get it... Why are we going to Bezeld then?”

“Honestly? Because I don’t have any better ideas.”

“Oh, c’mon...”

“Well, it’s not like we’re drowning in plausible-sounding legends. And whenever a good lead does come along, someone else has always gotten to the goods first. So even if the story is *implausible*, I figure we might as well follow up on it. The key is just to take things slow and easy, like this is a sightseeing trip.”

“I get that. It is nice to just enjoy the journey sometimes.”

“Sure is,” I said with a grin, and then...

Fwoooooom! The peaceful scene was interrupted by the sound of a distant explosion. I didn't have to search long for the source of the noise—a thin stream of black smoke was rising from the village up ahead.

“What the heck is that all about?” I wondered aloud.

“So much for enjoying the journey. Let's go, Lina!”

“Right!”

Where there's smoke, there's fire—and profit to be had! Thus Gourry and I took off running for the town.

When we arrived on site, there was a crowd forming around a house that looked like it had taken a direct hit by a Fireball. Part of it was a smoldering ruin, and that seemed to be the source of the smoke.

“What happened?!” I asked urgently.

But the villagers seemed just as confused as I was.

“That's what we'd like to know,” one said.

“We heard a sound, and by the time we got here...” another added.

“A young girl lives in that house! Can you help us clear the rubble?!” a third asked.

“On it! I'll get this done in a flash.” With that, I began to chant a spell. “*Vu Vrima!*”

Vrumm! Responding to those words of power, the dirt nearby swiftly billowed up to form a golem. Murmurs of shock and awe ran through the onlookers.

“Golem, move this rubble aside!”

“*Krrsh!*” Heeding my command, the golem began rooting through the still-smoldering wreckage. But just as it got to work...

Shoooooom! I heard a second explosion from the forest behind us.

“Golem, if you find anyone inside, get them out of the rubble and stand by! If not, keep clearing rubble until it's all cleaned up!”

After giving my golem orders, I darted into the forest with Gourry hot on my heels. The smell of greenery was thick around us. The birds had stopped singing though, either startled by the explosion or cowed by the heavy sense of danger around us. And...

Bwoooooom! Then came a third explosion, this one closer than I was expecting. Gourry and I looked at each other, nodded, and dashed in the direction of the blast.

“Ngh!”

With the agility of a cat, a girl landed in the grass nearby. She looked about fourteen or fifteen, was on the short side, and had large, round eyes. She was dressed more or less like the other villagers and wore her long, black hair in a loose braid over her shoulder.

And standing before her was a shadow come to life—a man clad all in black.

“I hope you don’t think you can get away from us,” he said. He had all but his eyes covered... like an assassin one might say, if not for the decidedly *unassassin*-like air about him. “Even if—if—you somehow manage to give me the slip, where exactly would you go then, hmm? You’ve no family and now no home to return to—my Fireball saw to that! I don’t think you want to spend your nights under the stars, so for your own good, stop being stubborn and come with me!”

“Sheesh... For a guy trying to do the whole ‘inconspicuous’ thing, you sure got a mouth on you,” someone boldly replied—but it wasn’t the girl.

“What?!”

I probably don’t need to tell you who the man saw when he turned around. It was none other than me and Gourry, who’d finally arrived after tracking down the commotion.

“Who are you people?!” the man in black demanded.

“You think we’re stupid enough to give our names to basically the sketchiest guy in the universe?”

“What?! You make me sound like some common criminal!” he protested, raising his voice.

Uh, do you not realize you look like one in that getup, bub?

“Regardless,” he continued, “if you won’t tell me who you are, at least tell me what you’re doing here!”

“We were passing by when we saw a house in town go ‘splodey, and then we heard another big boom in the forest. Kinda grabs the old attention, y’know? Quiz time: Where you come from, what do they call people who blow up houses and try to kidnap girls? Let me guess—common criminals?”

“Th-That’s... It’s all right in service to a mission!”

“And what ‘mission’ is that?” I raised an eyebrow at his choice of words.

“None of your business!”

“Look, whatever your circumstances,” Gourry said as he took a confident step forward, “we still can’t just stand by and let this happen. I’m betting there’s no way to talk you down, is there?”

“Of course not. You’re free to play heroes and go sticking your noses into this, but I’ll warn you... If you don’t withdraw peacefully, I’ll have to get rid of you some other way. Get my drift?”

“The infamous silence-you-forever deal?” I snorted at the black-clad man’s clichéd threat. “Perspective check. If we were the kind of people who’d cave to a little petty intimidation, you really think we would’ve come after a seedy guy like you in the first place?”

Rather than respond with words, the man drew the shortsword from his waist. His stance looked pretty sharp. He might've been a loudmouth relative to his stealthy getup, but he at least seemed to know what he was doing in a fight.

Meanwhile, the girl he was chasing just stood there for some reason, like she intended to see how this all panned out. Gotta say, I would've preferred she'd hightail it outta here while me and Assassin Dude were having our little tête-à-tête. Not that I could just out and yell that.

Gourry smoothly drew his longsword and announced himself, "I'm Gourry Gabriev."

"You can call me Zain," Assassin Dude declared in turn. And when he did...

"Fool!" came a chastising voice from behind him. A rustle in the grass preceded the appearance of another black-clad figure. Had he been there all this time cloaking his presence? Was that the real reason the girl hadn't made a break for it? Had she managed to sense him when even I couldn't?

The second assassin's scolding had Zain at a loss. He stammered, "G-Gal—"

"Don't give them my name too!"

"B-But—"

"Not only did you give your own name to strangers, you revealed the name of a comrade! You could at least *attempt* to practice a *hint* of discretion!"

"B-But they're just codenames..."

"Oh, for the..." A vein bulged in Second Assassin Dude's forehead at this latest bout of buffoonery from Zain. Bet it's exhausting to have an underling like him.

I let out a sigh. "Using codenames suggests you're both part of some organization in service to a royal family or local lord, right?"

"Ack! How'd you guess?!" Zain yelped.

Yeesh, what a damned mark...

Gal-whatshisname groaned again at Zain's antics, then turned his attention back to us. "It certainly seems you know too much," he said, perfectly cool in stark contrast to the badly shaken Zain. "I really will have to silence you now. Don't blame me; blame your own meddling, and Zain's stupid mouth."

"Gee, you sound pretty confident about how this is gonna go down. Care to put your theory to the test?"

Sparks were flying between us and the two assassins. But my greatest concern at the moment was the fact that the girl still hadn't moved. Was she just scared stiff, or... were there more assassins lurking nearby?

“Hah!” Zain shouted as he made the first move, as if to wrest me from my hesitation. Weaving through the trees, he closed the distance on Gourry.

Gotta say, dude was freaking fast! I caught two streaks of silver glinting in the sunlight dappling the forest—*Zing!* Gourry had parried the first attack, but Zain clicked his tongue and immediately tried again. He certainly was good... but not as good as Gourry from what I could see.

As Zain went in for a second strike, Second Assassin Dude drew his own sword and came for me. Ugh, I wasn’t going to finish my incantation in time! I drew my shortsword to block the incoming blow, all while keeping up my chant.

Clang!

Dang, this guy was pretty good too! I could more or less keep up with him thanks to my recent sword training with Gourry, but if not for that, that opening move might’ve bisected me on the spot.

Second Assassin Dude, like Zain, immediately pulled back his blocked sword, leaped to the side, and swung again. Except this time... he was going for Gourry! Were they trying to double-team him first?!

“Tch!” Gourry blocked Second Assassin Dude’s strike, then tried to dodge Zain’s with a slight twist of his body.

Pah-piing! The tip of Zain’s sword scratched Gourry’s breastplate with a deafening peal. While Second Assassin Dude then kept Gourry in place, Zain readied another strike... But before he could unleash it, I finished my spell.

“Diem Wind!”

Whoosh!

“Gwuh!”

A non-fatal but buffeting gust sent all three men flying! *Nice one, Lina!* Okay, so I nailed Gourry with the baddies, but I’d still stymied the assassins’ onslaught!

“Huh?! You blew your ally away too?” Zain asked in shock as he picked himself up off the grass.

“Hah, amateur!” I scoffed. “Ever heard the saying ‘better overkill than underkill?’”

“What the hell is wrong with you?” he whispered, taken aback.

Meanwhile, a smirk appeared on my face. While I was indulging this little comedy routine with Zain, Gourry had gotten up and readied his sword. See? I was totally just talking smack to buy Gourry time to get back in the game. It said absolutely nothing about my personality whatsoever. No siree!

Still, these guys weren’t just pretty good—they were also uncompromising in the pursuit of their goal. Even Zain, who seemed pretty bird-brained, was an able opponent. Which meant... I needed to

finish this fast!

“Gourry, I’m going for a big one! Sorry if it hits you too!” I bluffed. The two assassins looked shaken—but not half as much as Gourry did.

“W-Wait, Lina! Please reconsider!”

““Lina”?! Wait, are you... Lina Inverse?!” The one who said that wasn’t either of the assassins, but the girl, who was still watching.

“D-Did she say Lina Inverse?!” Gal-whats his name shouted in shock.

“You’ve heard of her?” Zain asked in response.

“You *haven’t*?! She has quite a number of titles I wouldn’t dare repeat in polite company, and she’s always number one on those ‘top ten sorcerers you’d never want to be friends with’ lists!”

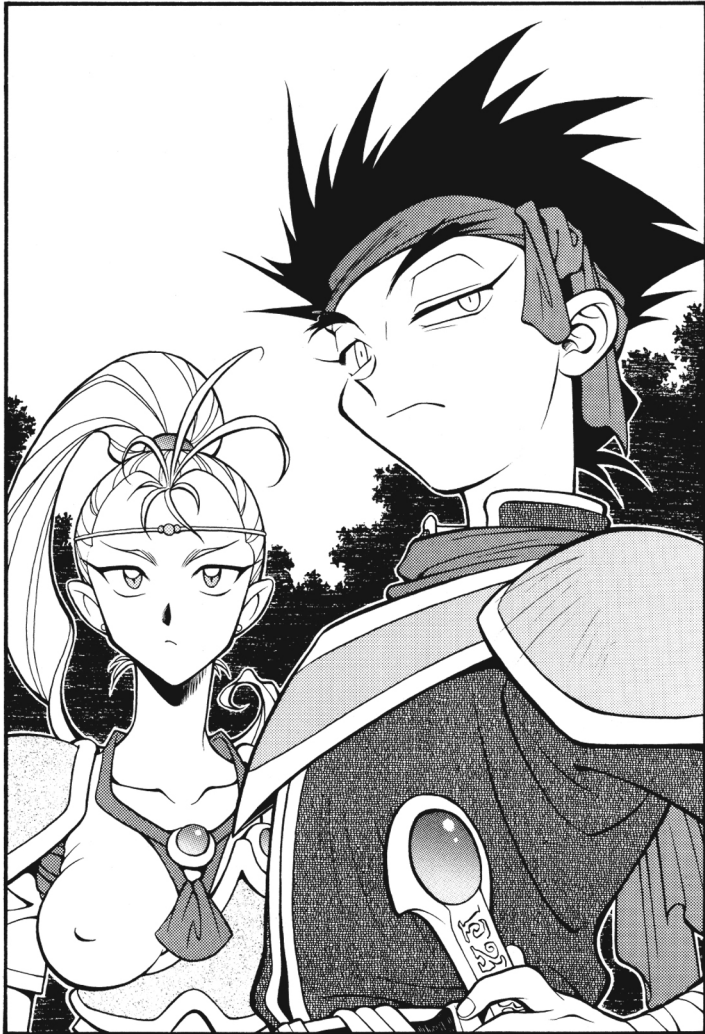
“Who’s making those lists?!” I found myself screaming in response. *Sheesh! You get a little notoriety and the nasty rumor mills start churning nonstop. What a world!*

Second Assassin Dude clucked his tongue slightly. “It’s a bad matchup, but if it’s two-on-two, we might still stand a chance—”

“How’s about four-on-two then?” a new voice asked, this one coming from behind us all, back in the direction of the village.

While keeping one eye on the assassins, I glanced over my shoulder to see a man and woman approaching. They both looked about twenty. The man was tall, with short black hair and a rather sour expression that sullied his otherwise decent looks. The woman was tall and beautiful, with long silver hair done up in a ponytail. He wore light mail and she leather pauldrons, and they both approached with swords drawn.

Traveling mercenaries, huh? At the very least, they didn’t seem like part of the assassins’ crew.



“So, what’s the plan, man? You hang around much longer and you’re really gonna draw a crowd,” pressed the male mercenary.

“Drat! Let’s get out of here,” said Second Assassin Dude, and with one click of his tongue, he leaped into the underbrush and disappeared.

Ah, a textbook retreat! Well-timed and efficient.

In contrast, Zain couldn’t help spewing a few third-rate villain lines as he made his own unceremonious withdrawal: “You haven’t heard the last of us! We’ll be back! Mark my words!”

Gourry and I breathed a sigh of relief only when the two goons were completely out of detectable range.

“That was a big help. Thanks,” I then said to the couple who’d arrived on scene.

The man waved his hand in casual dismissal. “Meh, spare us the parade. We ain’t here to help you out anyway. We know the girl, is all.” He then turned to her and said, “Yo. Been a while, Sherra. Those assassins here for the you-know-what too?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about!” the girl responded brusquely, flicking her braid over her shoulder with a finger.

The “you-know-what,” huh?

“Say, think you could fill us in on the situation?” I asked.

But the man waved me off again without even sparing a glance. “What, you two are still here? Why don’t you buzz off already?” he scoffed.

Grr...

“I beg your—”

“I get how you feel an’ all, Sherra. But you can’t stubborn your way outta this.”

“Uh, hello?”

“If you don’t let someone help ya out, you’re just gonna keep gettin’ into situations like this—”

“Hey! Old man!”

I could see his shoulders twitch at that one. Oho, got ’im! Control of the situation, consider yourself regained!

“O-Old man?” He turned back toward me with a creak, a vein visibly bulging on his forehead. But before he could start...

“We got here first, y’know? You can’t come barging in halfway through, fail to do anything, then shoo us off without so much as an explanation! That’s rude! Only an old man would have the audacity! And don’t try to tell me you’re not really that old, ’cause you’re a crotchety old fart on the inside for sure!”

“Geh...”

The man turned to his female companion for backup, but she

simply watched the situation unfold with curious eyes. Sure didn't seem like she'd be coming to his aid.

Okay! Time to go all-in on the "old man" offense— Wait, hang on. I wasn't here to insult this jerk. I was supposed to be figuring out the bigger picture. Heh, whew! Almost lost control of myself there...

That said, the longer this dude and I talked, the more we were going to argue and the less likely he'd be to tell me what I wanted to know. His female companion seemed pretty tight-lipped too... which meant there was only one recourse left!

I brushed past the couple and approached the girl—Sherra, apparently—with a bright smile. "So, you know who I am?"

"Y-Yes. Well, you have quite a reputation... in a few senses of the word..."

I didn't much like the sound of that, but I decided to let it slide. "I see. Then I'll cut to the chase. Since I'm so famous, I'll give you my autograph if you tell me what's going on here!"

"Huh?!" Sherra's expression hardened into a grimace. "Er... well... I mean..." she stammered.

"Hey, it's okay," Gourry said with a look of genuine concern. "No one will think any less of you. Just accept the autograph and get it over with. I know it'll be a real bummer on your day, but..."

Rgh!

"Just don't say anything like 'why would anyone want that?' or whatever else you're really thinking, unless you want to see her go nuts. And besides, the autograph's not all bad. It might help you ward away burglars, or maybe you could use it for a potholder..."

Krack! The head-sized rock I crowned Gourry with shut him up good.

"I know there are a lot of bad rumors about me out there. But it's not nice to judge people based solely on gossip, is it?" I said sincerely.

Sherra shook her head fervently, her expression still frozen on her face for some reason.

"Everyone has a few skeletons in their closet. But those men in black are after you, and they tried to kill us for interfering too. Do you really intend to let this situation continue just because you're not comfortable talking about it?"

For this, the girl had no answer but silence. *Okay! Time to seal the deal!*

"Of course, at the end of the day, we're the ones sticking our noses into your business, so I'm not going to selfishly ask that you tell us absolutely everything. Just what you're willing to share. It might even lighten your load a little. As nosy as we are, we might be able to help —"

"Aw, c'mon. Don't go telling them nothin'." The man sidled up to

Sherra as he cut me off. "If you need help, that's what *we're* here for. Right, Mileena?"

The silver-haired woman just smiled awkwardly at this plea for agreement. "It's no skin off my nose," she said, "but your ulterior motives are showing, Luke."

"Hey now, don't go makin' it sound unseemly. All I'm sayin' is I can't stand to see a cute girl in need go un-helped. But don't get the wrong idea, Mileena. You're still the only one for me!"

"Idiot," Mileena whispered in irritation.

If her cheeks had flushed red and she'd averted her eyes slightly, I'd have thought, "Oh, this is your typical couple-in-denial rom-com." But she seriously glared at him when she called him an idiot in a voice that reeked of disgust. It was looking more to me like Luke was a tagalong with a one-way infatuation... Ah, but I digress.

"I'm a cute girl in need too!" I protested. "As in, I *need* to know what's going on!"

Luke stared at me seriously for a while, then said, "I totally *can* stand to see annoying girls in need."

Splat!

"What'd you say?!" I growled, my boot suddenly planted deep in Luke's face.

"Hey! The hell?!"

"Don't you try to play dumb after spewing that crap about me!"

"Well, did I say anything wrong?!"

"You bet you did! Mileena will never like you if you don't learn a little tact!"

"Geh! She... She likes me plenty! Anyone can tell we're a steamin' hot couple in love! Right, Mileena?!"

"No," she responded indignantly, possibly annoyed by Luke's embarrassing choice of words.

"Aw man! My love still ain't gotten through to you?!"

"See? Ha! She doesn't like you even one little bit!" I jeered.

"Shut up! A kid like you would never understand the subtleties of romance!"

"Who're you calling a kid?!"

"Um... just thought I'd point out that the girl's leaving."

"Put a sock in it, Gou— Wait, huh?"

Gourry had apparently revived at some point, and I looked around when I processed what he'd said. Sure enough, I spotted Sherra striding swiftly back toward town.

"Hey, w-wait!"

"Hold up, Sherra!"

All four of us quickly ran after her.

“Why are you followin’ us?” Luke asked with a glare.

I hit him with a glare right back. “The village is this way, duh. Now lemme ask you why you’re stalking that little girl! She doesn’t seem to like you much!”

“Oh, so you think she likes *you*, huh?”

“At least she doesn’t hate my guts like she does yours!”

“Oh yeah? I dare you to say that again!”

“Ha! I’ll say it as many times as you want!”

Invisible sparks flew between me and Luke, casting a tension over the surrounding forest. Gourry and Mileena were walking some distance away, pretending they didn’t know us.

This gave me a little time to think. Judging by their interactions with Sherra, I was guessing Luke and Mileena had been pestering her for a while. Could they be after whatever it was the assassins wanted? Speaking of... what *did* they want? The most obvious candidate, of course, was treasure. Sherra must have the key to some kind of loot, which both the assassin duo and Team Luke were after.

That would certainly explain the situation. And if we assumed my prior deduction was correct—that the assassins were acting as special forces for some royal family or local lord—then the treasure they were trying to get their hands on must be pretty sweet! That meant it was worth sticking around. I just needed to help Sherra out of her bind, earn her gratitude, and—

“Aaaaaah!” An abrupt scream from the girl in question brought my train of thought to a halt.

“What’s wrong?!” I asked as I sprinted to catch up to her. I’d been so caught up in mulling things over and giving Luke the cold shoulder that I hadn’t realized we were already upon the village.

Sherra was standing there, completely motionless. Before her were a crowd of people and the golem I’d created, plus the heaping pile o’ junk that used to be her house.

“Are you all right?!” one villager called.

“What happened?” another asked as they crowded around her.

But she ignored them all and softly lamented, “My house...”

“Oh, right... That sorcerer girl thought you might be buried in the rubble and conjured this here golem to sort through it, but as you can see...” one villager said in response, pointing at me.

“Ohhh?” Sherra stiffly craned her neck as she turned to look my way. “As I recall, those men did blow up *part* of my house with a Fireball... So you kindly had your golem finish the job, did you?”

Grk!

Uh... Uh-oh! There was a distinct fury burning in Sherra’s eyes. Time for a patented Lina ass-covering!

“It’s... not like I did it on purpose. I just asked the golem to clean

up the rubble when I dashed off into the forest... I guess it couldn't tell where the rubble ended and the house began. Aha... haha. Golems, am I right?"

"This is unacceptable!" Sherra shrieked. "Where am I supposed to sleep tonight?!"

"Well, er... If you're in a jam, I'm happy to help!"

"You're the *reason* I'm in a jam! Give me back my house!"

"Um... um... I know! I'll summon a bunch of golems, and make them take the *shape* of a house!"

"I would never want to live in such a creepy house!"

Sheesh, some people! So picky about where they live... I started racking my brain, trying to think up a way to get back on Sherra's good side. In the end, I decided to pony up the cash to get her a room for the night, which seemed to calm things down for the time being.

Later that evening...

"The real question is... why are you guys here too?" I asked, coldly observing Luke and Mileena, who were sitting across the table from us in the eatery that made up the first floor of the inn.

Luke wasn't fazed. He just responded lightly, "What d'you expect? These're the only lodgings in town."

"So why are you *sitting* with us?"

"We ain't sittin' with you. We're sittin' with Sherra."

The center of this whole mess, Sherra herself, was ignoring all four of us as she unhappily munched on her dinner.

Hrm... I hadn't made a lot of progress re: getting on her good side. Generally at times like this, it was better to give someone their space than force the issue. With that in mind, I wanted to switch tracks and try talking about something else altogether... but given Sherra's refusal to speak to me and Mileena's overall stoicism, that meant my only conversation option was bickering with Luke.

Gourry, of course, was out of the question. Asking him to mediate was as good as using a willow branch for bungee jumping. Still, continuing to argue with Luke was just gonna make things more awkward instead of getting Sherra to warm up to us.

Maybe I should change things up by talking directly to her...

"I guess... you're still mad, huh, Sherra?" I asked, glancing at her as I shoveled down some salmon sautéed in butter. "I know I should've been more careful with my golem orders, and my carelessness ended up destroying your house." I popped some lettuce-wrapped roast beef in my mouth, then continued, "But I'm sorry about all that, and I really want to apologize." Another two bites of sweet shrimp stew. "I know that apologizing won't actually fix anything." A sampling of pork sausage and greens with a squeeze of lemon between

slices of bread. "I just... want to help you however I can."

"That is so not convincing!" *Kerwham!* I wasn't sure what she was so steamed about, but Sherra drove her knife and fork into the table and stood up. "Forget about the house! Just leave me alone! Both of you!" She pointed first at me, then at Luke, and then turned her back on us and stormed up the stairs to her room.

"Nice goin'. You just pissed her off more," Luke said reproachfully, glaring at me.

"Don't blame this on me!"

"Why not? It's your fault!"

"How?!"

"It'd rile anyone to watch you say that stuff while acting like that!"

"Not me!"

Sparks started flying between me and Luke again.

"Let's give her until morning," Mileena said calmly, defusing the near-explosive tension. "She might calm down after a night of rest."

"W-Well... fair enough," I admitted.

"If you say so, I ain't got no objections," Luke agreed.

"Good. In that case, let us at least eat in peace," she said with a bright smile.

The next day...

"Sherra left first thing this morning," relayed the innkeep.

"Huh?!" all four of us responded in shock.

We (sans Sherra) had finished breakfast with the air still frosty between us. When we finally realized the ice queen wasn't coming down, we took a look into her room and found it empty. We were worried the assassins might have snatched her overnight, so we asked the innkeeper and... Welp, you heard what he said. She'd been gone way too long for a casual morning stroll.

"Um, well... Did she say where she was going?" I asked.

The man thought for a moment and then answered, "Hmm, nothing about where she was going, but..."

"But she did say something?!"

"Just one thing."

"What was it?!"

"That I should ask the chestnut-haired sorceress—I'm guessing that's you—to pay her board."

Those unthinkable words rendered me silent.

His eyes on me, Luke spoke up with great sarcasm, "Sounds like Sherra ain't comin' back then. Ah, poor girl. If only someone hadn't gone and wrecked her house..."

"Grkk?! O-Oh, please! Who was it who said she'd calm down if we

left her alone for a night?!”

“Don’t you go blamin’ Mileena!”

“Then don’t you go blaming me either! Ah, whatever... Tracking down Sherra is our top priority right now. She may still be in the area, so I’m gonna go look for her! Gourry, you’re with me!”

“Sure thing!”

With that, Gourry and I stood up forcefully.

And just a little before noon, we returned to the inn empty-handed.

“Hrmmm... She’s not at the ruins of her home, and it sounds like nobody in the village has seen her. You think she blew town?” I wondered gloomily as I sat down at the table, sipping my fruit juice. *Argh! I hate it when I lose a good treasure lead!*

“If she did, what’s our next move?” Gourry asked.

I let out a sigh. “What do you think? If she’s gone, she’s gone. If she really peaced out on us, we have no way of knowing where she went.”

“Speaking of people missing, I don’t see those two either...”

“Maybe they’re taking a walk somewhere. But even if they are really gone, that doesn’t—” I was about to say that it didn’t change anything, but caught myself gulping.

Why *hadn’t* they done anything when we announced we were going to search for Sherra? Was it possible they had some idea where she’d gone? Was that why they didn’t try to stop us? Were they just waiting for us to leave so they could pursue their own lead?

Argh! I hate this!

I chugged the rest of my juice, stood up, and looked around for the old innkeep. “Pardon, but do you know where the couple who was with us this morning went?” I asked when I spotted him in the back washing dishes.

“Eh? After you two disappeared, they paid their tab and left,” he paused to say.

“They mention where they were headed?”

“No, but... Ah, that’s right. They told me to tell you, ‘It seems Sherra is gone, so we’re giving up and going home.’”

“Huh?” I frowned upon hearing this message.

Suspect. *Blatantly* suspect. After all the headbutting we’d done, there was no way those two had just up and abandoned this little operation. No, it had to be the opposite. They’d gone after Sherra themselves. That was the only reason they’d leave a message saying they’d given up and then skip out while we were gone.

In other words, it was time to track down Luke and Mileena! Clue-hunting, here we come!

“You know, I don’t know much about those two... Do you?” I asked. “Knowing more about them might tell us where Sherra went.”

The old man scratched his head and replied, “Hmm? Well, I figured they were wandering mercenaries or something, so I never paid them much mind. They’ve been staying here for three or four days, and they apparently dropped by Sherra’s place a few times.”

“So they go back, do they?”

“Not sure. Sherra hasn’t lived here all that long herself.”

“You mean she moved here from elsewhere?”

“Moved here? More like... she just showed up one day.”

“Sounds hinky.”

“Ah, it’s not like that. A local man named Glen used to live in that house with his wife, see. Had a real bee in his bonnet for adventure. It gave the missus a lot of grief,” the old man began, adding all sorts of details I hadn’t asked for.

Wait, was this the infamous “if asked for rumors, give ’em gossip” disease?! It was a common affliction among older country folk. The more isolated their corner of the world, the more they feel obliged to talk someone’s ear off at the slightest opportunity. And if someone infected catches you, you’re doomed to listen to their stupid, boring stories forever.

There’s only one way to break free—say you’re in a hurry, do a one-eighty, and walk straight out. And there were some opponents too formidable for even that, though it should work just fine on an amateur like this old guy. That said, gossip *was* a potential way to gather clues... So I decided to bear with it for a while and listened in quietly.

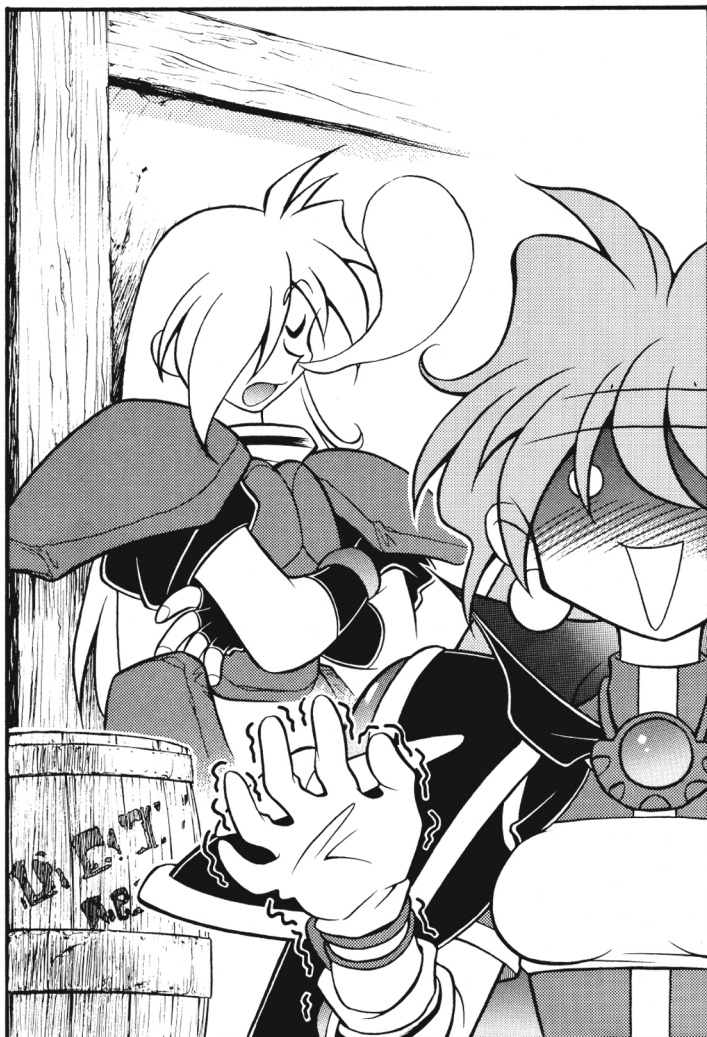
“His favorite words were ‘easy money.’ He preferred drinking, gambling, and whores to breakfast, lunch, and dinner. The man was hardly ever home with every get-rich-quick scheme he was chasing in some nearby town or other. He wasn’t even here for his wife’s death. To be honest, the folks around here didn’t care much for him. Then... Was it two years ago now? Three? He shows up back in town with that girl. Neither of ’em said a thing about it, but word on the street had it Sherra’s his illegitimate daughter. Not long after that, Glen got drunk one night, fell into the river, and drowned himself. The girl’s been living in that house on her own ever since. Er... I’m not boring you, am I?” he asked, suddenly snapping out of his ramble.

“Oh, not at all. I really love hearing people’s stories,” I said in quick denial.

“I was just wondering since your companion there appears to have fallen asleep.”

“Huh?” I looked beside me and found Gourry leaning back against the wall of the inn, snoring away.

You big jerk... I thought about kicking him awake, but feared it might stymie any more friendly chatting with the innkeep.



“Well, if he wants to sleep, let him.” I fought back my violent urges and instead encouraged the old man to go on. “What happened next?”

“Now, let me see... Sherra was basically one of us by then. She was a bit self-conscious of being an outsider, I think, and she could be a little unsociable, but the villagers all like her well enough. Of course, that might be partly out of pity, her father being the way he was and all. We figure she’s had a hard life.”

“A hard life, huh? Say, how’s she been supporting herself since her father passed?”

“How’s she supporting herself? Well... I don’t really know,” the old man admitted, none the wiser to my subtle leading of the conversation.

That was an interesting tidbit, though. If her layabout father was dead and Sherra wasn’t working, how was she making a living? My speculation about a hidden treasure was growing considerably less speculative.

“You mean she doesn’t work at all? It doesn’t sound like her father was the type to leave an inheritance.”

The old man waved dismissively at the thought. “An inheritance? No way. Every copper Glen earned went to booze that same night, and he was constantly trying to pawn off his possessions to anyone who’d give him the time of day. The fellow was always after quick cash. The funniest was that time he went to dig up orichalcum in Bezeld.”

Hmm, we’re kind of getting off the subject ag—

“Wait, orichalcum?!” I said, unwittingly raising my voice at the mention of that word.

Orichalcum was a kind of metal most folks never laid eyes on in a lifetime. It had interesting properties like blocking magical detection, which made it very useful to researchers in the sorcery game, but the stuff was even harder to find than gold. That rarity was reflected in its price, usually fetching double the market value of platinum. In other words... it would be an all-too-tempting prospect for someone looking to get rich quick.

“Is there really orichalcum in Bezeld?! Wait, Bezeld...” I murmured, then scowled. *Bezeld, huh?* Wasn’t that where the old swindler headman said we’d find a sword?

“Well, there *was* some, but golly, it was discovered... oh, I’d say twenty years ago. And they said it really wasn’t much in the end. But Glen heard about it and headed straight to Bezeld himself. We all knew he wouldn’t find anything. When he came back empty-handed and we said we told him so, what do you think his excuse was?”

Drat... Off-topic again.

“You’ll laugh when you hear this. He said that he didn’t find any orichalcum, but while he was digging, he came across a strange cave. When he went deeper in, he found a strange sword sticking out of a rock. But it was all just so creepy that he turned tail and ran! Can you believe it?”

“Say whaaat?!” I shouted, caught off-guard. “You said he found a sword? You mean...”

“Yup. Obviously, it was a total fish story. He was drunk as a lord when he told it.”

“I see...” I nodded vaguely along.

If this Glen guy was three sheets to the wind when he told the tale, it seemed even more likely to me to be true. After all, drunken braggadocio isn’t inclined to stories about running off with your tail between your legs. If he was just making up an excuse about why he didn’t find any orichalcum, surely he would’ve painted himself in a braver light... Say there was a monster he slew, or maybe he just barely managed to escape it after a harrowing chase.

Still, it was too hasty to assume solely based on this story that there really was a sword in Bezeld.

“Anyway, my wife has this theory that Glen had Sherra back when he was in Bezeld. She’s about the right age. And Glen did love the ladies...”

We were back in pure gossip territory, so I let it all go in one ear and out the other. How much of this was truth, and how much was fiction? There was just one thing I knew for sure—the key to unraveling this mystery was in Bezeld.

2: A Glimpse of Demons in Bezeld

“Um... So you’re saying there’s some weird sword in Bezeld?”

Gourry and I had skipped town after lunch and were currently on the road to the town in question. I’d finished giving him a rundown of the situation, and after a long hard think on the matter, that beaut of a response was what he came up with.

“I’m saying there *might* be. But there also *might not* be.”

“Uh, what?”

“There’s a chance that Sherra’s father really did find orichalcum in Bezeld. A real mother lode that—at the time, for some reason—he couldn’t take with him or immediately cash out. He was spooked someone might steal it out from under him, so he concocted a cautionary tale about a weird sword, which eventually found its way to the headman back in Fake Swordsville. Meanwhile, Sherra knew the real location of the orichalcum, and after her dad died, she managed to convert it into something spendable. That’s how she’s been getting by without working.”

“Aha.”

“Now, this all begs a certain question... Why’d ol’ Glen choose a sword for his cover story? If he wanted to keep people away, you’d think he’d have gone for something more in the I-got-attacked-by-a-scarey-monster vein. I feel like that detail lends credence to the theory that he really did find a sword.”

“Hmm...”

“But if it was a sword and not orichalcum, then I gotta wonder where Sherra’s getting her money. Could be she’s doing some under-the-table work... but given the way the innkeeper talked about her, I doubt it.”

“‘Under-the-table work’?”

“Yeah, don’t think about that one too hard. There’s also a chance that, in defiance of all expectation, her pops was a decent guy deep down and actually left her some secret savings. But those are basically our two main theories. You follow?”

“Hmm...” Gourry stared silently up at the sky for a while, then said, “It’s all a little beyond me, but everything will come together when we get to Bezeld, right?”

“Well, you could say that...” *Except if that’s your attitude, why did I bother explaining anything in the first place?*

“Although... we may just get to the bottom of things sooner than that,” Gourry continued, stopping just shy of where the road swung by a dense forest.

His behavior coupled with our location made it easy to read his mind. We had ourselves an ambush up ahead.

Now, as far as I knew, there was no law saying you *had* to set up your ambushes near lonely old forests in the middle of nowhere, though I’ll concede that the two are a match made in heaven. A camouflaged assassin’s nearly impossible to spot hiding amongst dark trees, meaning all you have to go on is their presence. And while even I could detect openly hostile enemies (your average bandit, for instance), I didn’t have a great track record against opponents actively masking themselves. It was great to have Gourry and his animal-like instincts around when I was facing one of those.

Y’know, like right now.

We didn’t have a whole lot of clues vis-à-vis our ambusher’s identity, but I wondered if it might be one of the men in black from before.

“I think I’m picking up what you’re putting down... You’re suggesting a certain someone in the brush might just share some info with us,” I said, then stopped in place and turned my eyes to the forest.

“Stay away from the girl,” came a voice on the wind, as if it had been waiting for my cue. It was unfamiliar, male, and hushed in a way that seemed wholly inappropriate on such a clear, sunny day.

Who did it belong to? The person hiding in the forest, duh! He was still concealing himself and cloaking his presence, however, meaning he was waiting to see how we reacted. And on that note... Well, I wasn’t about to back down!

“What girl? To whom, exactly, are you referring?” I said with feigned ignorance.

“Don’t play dumb with me,” the quiet voice responded.

“Huh... Sounds like you’ve got some brains, unlike that Zain guy.”

“All I want to hear is whether you’ll comply.”

Hmm... This guy was apparently sticking to his guns regardless of what bit I played or how I tried to bait him. Unlike Zain, he seemed to understand a little about strategy.

So... how about this?!

“Is your master really that obsessed with the sword?” I tried asking.

“Will you comply or not?”

Hrm, a tough nut to crack. In that case...

“Say what you like, but you guys don’t even know where Sherra is right now, do you? So no matter what you try, I have the knowledge

here—and the upper hand.”

At that, the voice fell silent for a time. *Bet I know what's coming next!*

Shwish! With no forewarning, something flew out at us from the trees.

Called it! Gourry and I leaped back to find several small knives impaling the ground at our feet. No sooner had I spotted them than I realized I couldn't move—he'd hit us with a Shadow Snap!

This was a spell that bound a person in place from the astral plane by pinning their shadow with a knife. It was a minor trick, really, but you had to know what you were doing to make it work. It was also impressive that this guy could use it on multiple targets at the same time. The spell, however, had one major weakness!

“Fireball!” I cried, releasing a spell of my own—one I'd begun chanting the second I'd guessed this was coming—toward the ground at our feet.

Fwoom! My Fireball burst into flames on contact, which instantly erased our shadows. With them gone, the binding was undone and we were able to move again.

“What?!” our attacker exclaimed, shocked by the speed of my reaction.

“There you are!” Gourry declared. Now that he was free, he drew the sword on his back and charged for the forest from which the knives had originated. But before he could make it, another glint of silver flew out from the brush—straight toward him!

Shing! Gourry deflected the incoming knife with his sword as a dark figure leaped out of the greenery and into the sunlight. His all-black getup instantly betrayed his identity.

“I knew it! You're part of Zain's goon squad!” I shouted.

The man responded with silence—and a swift charge my way!

“Not so fast!” Gourry interposed himself between us, but when he did, the man stepped to the side and threw a knife at me.

Too easy! I dodged it with a light twist.

“Hah!” Gourry swung his sword as the assailant tried to line up another shot. However...

Shing! The guy parried Gourry's strike with a shortsword that had appeared in his left hand. He didn't waste any time throwing another knife with his left, this time at Gourry from close range! It was right in his face!

“What?!” he yelled, bending to dodge the imminent attack.

The man in black took the opportunity to circle around and toss yet another knife in my direction. I dodged this one with ease too, but something felt off. For a guy with the skill to block a strike from Gourry, this dude's attack patterns were far too simplistic. *Don't tell*

me...

A quick look around confirmed my suspicions, so I quickly made with the chanting. The man in black kept throwing knives, and Gourry and I kept dodging them. The cycle repeated itself again and again until...

At last, the man abruptly leaped away from us, forming a symbol with his fingers in front of his chest. *Here we go!*

“Gaiag Rise!” Responding to his words of power, the knives he’d thrown began emitting a dark purple light.

Yep. Dude hadn’t really been trying to hit me or Gourry at all. He was just making it look that way so he could form a magic circle in the ground. And in short order, as if bubbling from the earth itself, a massive brass demon began to rise up in the circle’s center.

Little did Mr. All-in-Black know that I’d seen this coming too. He didn’t realize it, but I’d positioned myself across the magic circle from him—and I had my spell ready to go now! Just as the demon’s massive body rose to block the man in black from my sight...

“Gaav Flare!” The fiery trail I conjured forth pierced through the demon, reducing it to ash even as it streaked on to incinerate the man in black! At least, that was the plan. In practice... “Huh?”

My outstretched hand was totally flameless. Not one teensy little spark to be seen.

Wait a minute...

Ahhhh! Of course! I totally forgot! The realization hit me like a ton of bricks. The spell I’d just tried to cast called on the power of Chaos Dragon Gaav, retainer to the dark lord of our world... who’d had a dinner date with annihilation not so long ago.

That simple little fact had slipped my mind as I’d gone about chanting the spell like everything was hunky-dory. I mean, obviously, you can’t call on Chaos Dragon’s power when there’s no more Chaos Dragon, right? Dammit! What’s *wrong* with me?! As I was kicking myself, stewing over what to do next...

“Hrahhh!” The brass demon finished materializing with a howl.

Welp, so be it! No time to wallow in Past Lina’s itty-bitty mistakes! I got my head back in the game and began chanting my next spell.

“Destroy him!” the man in black shouted, pointing at Gourry.

The demon roared in response, summoning five or six flaming orbs that flew toward the blond lug. He made his move in that same instant, but rather than dodging, charged straight at the demon!

Dude, wait!

Worry though I might, I didn’t need to—Gourry easily weaved through the incoming flames. But the man in black, perhaps having predicted this turn of events, threw a knife straight into Gourry’s trajectory. If he stopped to avoid it, he’d be leaving himself wide open

in front of the demon!

Seemed our ambusher had suddenly gotten serious about killing us! Too bad I wasn't about to let that happen!

"Dynast Breath!"

Krikshhh! The spell I unleashed instantly froze, pulverized, and sublimated the demon into a fine mist.

Clink! Simultaneously, Gourry used his sword to knock the knife out of the air.

"What?!" The man in black probably hadn't expected the demon he'd worked so hard to summon to get trounced so fast, as the sight gave him great pause.

And what do you do when your enemy's distracted? Well, Gourry chose to roll, scoop up one of the knives he'd deflected, and then throw it back at our attacker. The guy didn't come to his senses in time, and subsequently fell to his knees as the small blade buried itself deep in his right thigh.

"Guh!"

Sword still drawn, Gourry slowly approached the compromised assassin. "It's over now. You can't fight with your leg in that condition," he said, keeping his guard up all the while.

"Tch... It's over, is it?" the man in black whispered, gritting his teeth. If Gourry had been anything less than completely cautious in his approach, the would-be assassin might've had options... But given Gourry's wariness and the poor guy's wounded leg, he was done for.

"Just spill it already. Tell me what you guys are—"

Before I could even finish asking—*Fwoom!*—the man in black's body exploded!

"Wha?!" Gourry shouted in disbelief.

There'd been no external attack, meaning...

"He blew himself up... to protect his secret. Darn it... What a stupid thing to do," I whispered, a bitter taste in my mouth.

"But it kept us from learning anything."

"Don't be silly. Just because he didn't *tell* us anything doesn't mean we didn't *learn* anything."

"Huh? What the..."

A dumbfounded expression crossed Gourry's face. Man, what a hopeless case.

"Listen, Gourry, the fact that this dude was waiting here to attack us means there's really gotta be something in Bezeld."

"How do you figure?"

"The black cloaks are after something Sherra knows, so it's no wonder they're trying to put a stop to any competition. Now, by that logic, do you really think they'd bother with us if we were headed in the *wrong* direction?"

“Oh, I get it.” Gourry nodded readily. “But hang on a minute... If there was an assassin here, does that mean they already killed those two who left before us?”

“Maybe. Or maybe they went in a totally different direction, or maybe they’re avoiding the main roads. Anyway, the other thing we learned here is that the men in black haven’t caught Sherra yet. This guy wasn’t taking any of my bait until I said I knew where she was, and then he attacked. They don’t know where she is, so when I said I *did*, he was compelled to try to take me in and test the veracity of my claim. That’s also why he kept things nonlethal at first.”

“Ah, yeah. That’s true.”

Still, the more I thought about it, the less sense any of it seemed to make. The men in black brigade must have known when they blew up Sherra’s house that she would make for Bezeld. It was safe to assume, then, that our assassin-slash-lookout friend had been stationed here since yesterday.

That being the case, how had Sherra managed to slip by? Was it possible she was going somewhere other than Bezeld? Either way, heading there ourselves was still our best and only bet for the time being.

“All righty, better get a move on. To Bezeld!”

And so Gourry and I resumed our journey.

“But Lina, those guys in black and those other two...”

“Luke and Mileena.”

“Yeah, those two. Just who are they, do you think?” Gourry asked right around sunset as we made our way down a pretty monotonous forest road.

“‘Who are they’? C’mon, man... The former are spec ops for some royal or local lord or whatever. I said as much when we were fighting them yesterday.”

“Did you really?”

“Didn’t you listen to a word I said to that Zain dude?”

“Well, you weren’t talking to me, so why would I?”

Why would you...? Are you serious? Don’t test me, man...

“Whatever... Anyway, that’s who I think the black cloaks are. As for Luke and Mileena, they’re probably like us. Mercenaries or some such who’ve got their eye on Sherra’s treasure.”

“Hmm... So it might not be a sword after all.”

“What makes you say that?” I scowled thoughtfully at Gourry’s words.

“Well, I mean... You said the guys in black work for a king or something, right? So why go to all this trouble over a sword?”

“Hahh...” I let out a sigh and nodded resolutely. “You know what?”

Good for you. That was an impressive venture for the ol' Gourry noggin."

"The ol' Gourry noggin?"

"But in all seriousness, man... you don't get just how incredible legendary weapons are, do you?"

"Huh? I mean, if you go to war, even if you've got a legendary weapon, a single flashy attack spell can still take you out, well... in a flash, you know?"

"Sure. But you're assuming a legendary weapon's true worth lies on the battlefield. Which ain't the case, you hear? Their real value is in the techniques used to make them."

"What?"

"Legendary weapons have properties that can't be reproduced by modern magical methods. There's incredible merit to studying what they're capable of and how they were created, because you can find ways to apply those principles to other things. That's worth way more than some measly little treasure. Remember how Amelia and Zelgadis would use the Astral Vine spell to temporarily charge their swords with magic?"

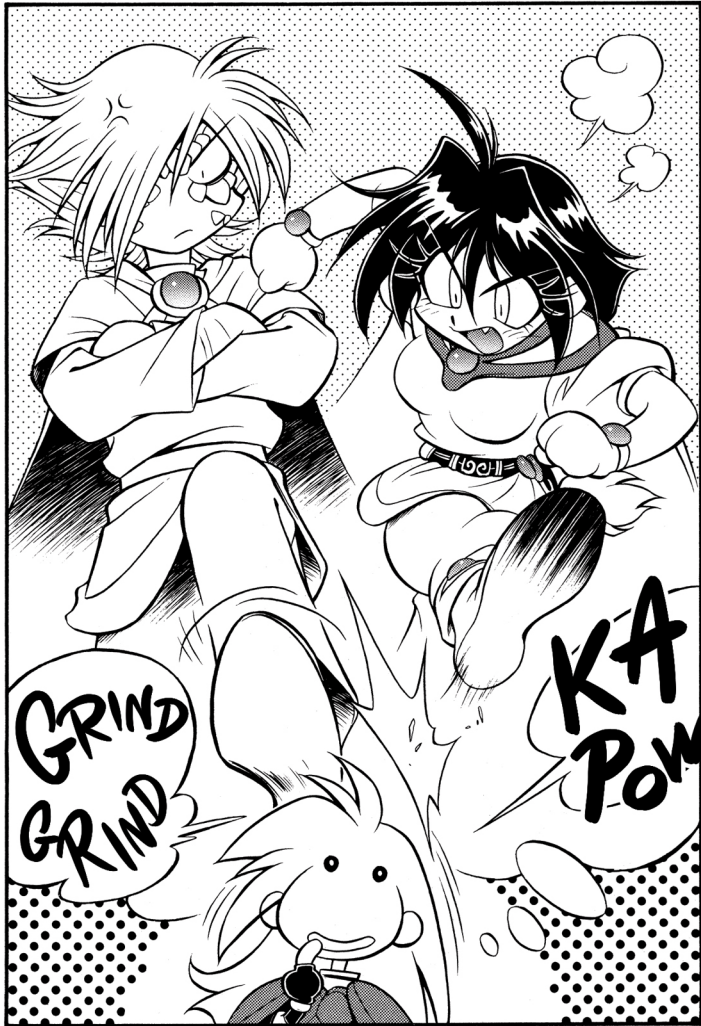
"Who?"

Splat! That particular line was so unbelievable that it literally bowled me over.

"You... You! Gourry!" A vein throbbed in my temple as I picked myself up.

Gourry replied with a strained smile, "I'm kidding, just kidding! Even I wouldn't forget our old companions."

"You better watch what you joke about! Some things are way too convincing coming outta your mouth..."



“A-Anyhoo... a sorcerer invented that spell long ago by applying techniques he learned from studying a magic sword.”

“Kay...”

“Of course, there are legendary weapons that might yield bupkis in terms of useful knowledge. It’s kind of a gamble, if we’re being totally honest. But that doesn’t mean you shouldn’t try to track them down when you can. Even if you don’t learn anything worthwhile from it or ever use it much, you still get a sweet sword and all the bragging rights—and that ain’t nothing.”

“But to kill people for that...”

“You still don’t get it, Gourry. A legendary weapon can fetch enough coin to put a family on easy street for life. That’s more than enough to kill for.”

“Easy street for life? They’re really worth that much?!”

“You bet they are! You really think people are buying legendary freakin’ weapons for chicken feed?” I asked with a glare.

Gourry just replied calmly, “Well, I remember a certain someone offering to buy my Sword of Light for five hundred and change once...”

Krrrk... Tch. Why was *that* the stuff he remembered? “Regardless, my point stands. Even if it really is ‘just’ a legendary sword, I’m not one bit surprised that royal goons are coming out of the woodwork for it.”

“I see.” Gourry nodded thoughtfully in response, then suddenly came to a stop. “W-Wait a minute...” Half frozen in place, he turned his head, creakingly, toward me. “Wait just a minute! Does that mean we’re gonna have to keep fighting them from now on?!”

“I mean, if you wanna get technical about it... Yes.”

“Wh-What’re we gonna do?! We don’t even know how many of them there are!”

“That’s true! I guess you’ll have to dig down deep and give this everything you’ve got!”

“Me? What about you?! And why are we putting ourselves through all this for a sword we don’t even know exists?”

“Would you rather just kick back and let such a juicy opportunity slip by? All while Sherra’s out there getting stalked by who-knows-what?”

“Rgh...” Gourry let out a slight groan at this. “That’s right... I forgot Sherra’s in this too...”

Don’t forget about her, you big jerk!

“And setting aside the question of whether there really is a sword or a treasure, I think I’d always regret it if I turned back now. So...”

“I guess that’s fair,” Gourry conceded, though he looked

somewhat unhappy about it.

I hadn't told him, but there was something else on my mind too: Why were the men in black and Team Luke only coming after Sherra now? Rumors of the sword had been around for decades, and it had even been a few years since Sherra moved to town and her father passed away. It sounded like no one had bothered her before now, so why the sudden change? Something must have happened to spur the spec ops and the mercenaries to action... meaning there was more to the story than we yet knew.

I hope nothing bad comes out of this... With that thought, I turned once more to the road cutting through the dark green forest before us.

"Huh? What's that?" I whispered, stopping in place.

Darkness was just beginning to creep across the dusky sky, and the clouds on the horizon up ahead were tinted crimson. It wasn't sunset, though. The sun was dipping in the other direction—behind us.

"It does look a little red. A fire, maybe?" Gourry asked casually, likewise gazing upon the horizon.

A fire? Of course...

"Wait, how can you be so calm about this?! If that's the next village on fire, that means no inn for the night! We'll be camping out!"

"Not like there's anything we can do about it."

"There sure as heck is! We can get over there and help put it out! Let's go!"

Without waiting for a reply, I began to recite my amplification chant. The four talismans on my wrists, waist, and chest emitted their faint lights. I then moved into my spell, taking Gourry's hand when I got to the words of power: "Lei Wing!"

Whoosh! The wind whipped into a barrier around us as we rose into the air... then took off for the blaze on the horizon!

Lei Wing was a spell used for quick flight, and when boosted by my talismans, I could move at a zippy clip even with Gourry in tow. The scenery streaked by us, and in short order...

"The village!" he cried out in shock.

The village ahead—the very one where we'd been planning to stay—was swallowed by a scarlet inferno. This wasn't just a house or two on fire. The entire town was billowing flame to the heavens, like the whole place had all gone up at once.

What in the world...?

We were still a good distance away and the wind barrier impeded my vision, so it was hard to tell what exactly was happening—but that didn't stop me. I summoned every last bit of my willpower and redoubled our speed. Once we were close enough to ground zero, we touched down and I dismissed my spell.

That's when it started.

“!”

Immediately, we could spy figures both large and small darting through the red flames. It was the villagers fleeing... from the rampage of a few dozen lesser and brass demons! Were they the ones who'd set fire to the village?!

Such breeds of demon didn't have a proclivity to swarm in numbers like this, which suggested something else was afoot here. (The most likely theory being that someone had summoned the demons and sicced them on the populace.) But right now, figuring out the cause of the horror took a backseat to stopping it!

“Gourry!”

“Right!”

We nodded to each other, then took off in a run toward the burning village.

“Assher Dist!”

Fwssh! The brass demon I nailed with my spell instantly turned to black powder. Seeing this, the other low-level demons nearby turned their attention to me, and Gourry took the opportunity to charge! Before they could even react, one had already fallen victim to his blade.

See, I'd cast Astral Vine on it before we arrived on the scene. That enhanced his sword and made it effective against demons—even pure ones. It'd make our fight a lot easier, but still...

“Hraaagh!” One of the lesser demons let out an angry howl as it summoned and hurled a few dozen fiery arrows our way.

I dodged through them while chanting my spell, and... “Dynast Breath!” I pulverized that one too.

But still, there were too damned many of them! Lesser and brass demons belonged to a family known as demidemons, noteworthy for their sturdy bodies and ability to nullify attack spells below a certain power threshold. Gourry and I could handle a couple of 'em easy, but this many all at once was proving to be a pain. If we'd been in an empty field somewhere, I could've just let loose a Dragon Slave or similar to sweep the place clean, but that was out of the question with villagers in proximity.

“Goz Vu Row!” My next strike destroyed yet another brass demon. No sooner had it fallen than I felt a surge of hostility behind me! I quickly leaped away and whipped around to see a third brass demon standing there.

“Graaagh!” It let out a nasty howl and conjured a dozen fiery arrows. Then—

“Fell Zaleyd!”

Shing! A beam of light streaked in from the side and blew the demon's head off! No way had that come from Gourry. Who, then...?

I scanned the area and spotted a woman standing nearby, her fluttering silver hair gleaming red in the light of the flames.

"*Mileena?!!*" I gasped.

I hadn't realized the other half of Team Luke was a spellcaster herself. Drawn longsword in hand, she turned her stoic gaze my way.

"We'll talk later. Let's take care of these first," she said calmly before beginning a chant.

She then easily dodged a swing from a charging lesser demon, responding with a swipe of her own. The demon retaliated in pain and rage, but Mileena dodged again and finished things with one spell...

"*Dis Rush!*"

Hmm... Not a bad showing. But now was no time to be watching in admiration! I nerved myself and got back to my own zap-a-thon.

"*Dynast Blas!*"

Kracka-pop! Lightning flashed, and down went another brass demon!

A burnt smell hung in the night air, and the full moon shone down on a forest abuzz with insects.

Our battle had finally come to an end sometime after dark. Once we'd polished off the demons, Mileena and I focused on using our magic to extinguish the houses and other stray fires... And at last, we had a moment to catch our breath.

That said, the atmosphere wasn't exactly conducive to relaxation. We'd evacuated the villagers to an open area at the edge of town, but things were far from copacetic. The wails of locals grieving the loss of homes and loved ones drifted by on the breeze.

"Hey, you guys ain't half bad after all!" Needless to say, the inappropriately chipper voice piercing the quiet melancholy was none other than Mileena's jerk of a companion, Luke.

"Oh, shut up! What the hell happened here?" I tore into him.

He just shrugged and asked in response, "How would I know?"

"How could you *not* know?!"

"Me and Mileena were doin' stuff here in town, and then all of a sudden, the place is crawlin' with demons. We gave it our best, but did you see how many of those suckers there were? We couldn't take 'em all, and the next we know, they're settin' everythin' on fire... That's about when you guys showed up. Maybe if you'd come sooner, the town might still be standing."

"Oh, don't you dare put this on us! I don't know if you were trying to beat us to the punch or what, but you're the ones who bailed on us with that sorry lie to chase Sherra yourselves!"

“Huh? Dunno what you’re talkin’ about.”

“Don’t play dumb with me! You’re after the sword too, right?”

“Wait, ‘too’? Are you tellin’ me you’re also—” Luke burst out in shock.

Ha! Got ‘im! I flashed a big grin. “Aha! So you *are* after the sword!”

“W-Wait a minute... Ahh, dammit! You tricked me!”

But his realization came all too late. He’d fallen for my little linguistic setup hook, line, and sinker, telling me exactly what I needed to know. (If he hadn’t reacted at all, it just would’ve tipped the scales in favor of the “sorry, no sword” theory.)

“Well, the old innkeeper gave me the skinny on Sherra’s dad, and I connected the rest of the dots myself,” I explained. “I’m guessing you haven’t found Sherra, huh?”

“Dunno what you’re talkin’ about.”

“Oh, knock it off already. I’m not yanking your chain here. You said you were ‘doing stuff’ in town, yeah? I’ll bet that means you were asking around after Sherra.”

“...”

“Well intuited.” It was Mileena, not Luke, who responded with a calm smile.

“Hey!” he barked.

“They won’t buy our excuses, so why keep up the pretense?” she said casually, ignoring his displeasure.

“You got a point there...” he conceded.

Interesting. Luke seemed kind of whipped.

“By the way, how did you two even make it this far?” I asked.

“Did you have to fight the guys in black too?”

“You fought ‘em?!”

“Well, yeah. And won, of course, but we didn’t get to question the one who jumped us,” I admitted.

Luke looked at me in dismay. “Are you people stupid?! It shoulda been obvious they’d have traps set up! But you just waltzed right on down the main road?! Why didn’t you cut through the forest?”

“Are you saying *you* cut through the forest?”

“Course we did!”

“Oho... Well, unlike you, I wasn’t about to skip out on a good meal and a good night’s sleep just because I was scared of a little ambush.”

“Who said I was scared?!”

“You did!”

“I didn’t—”

“Luke,” Mileena pressed him, and he clammed up immediately. Ohoho... Yup, she had him well trained indeed.

“Anyhoo, this is no time for bickering,” I said at last after Luke had rightly shut his mouth. “The real question now is what caused so many demidemons to spawn here. It certainly can’t be natural. So here’s what I’m thinking... The man in black we fought on the way here had a summoning spell, so it seems pretty likely to me that his buddies were behind this attack too.”

Luke and Mileena glanced at each other as I shared my hunch with them.

“You haven’t heard?” Mileena turned to me and asked. “Demons are currently appearing in huge numbers around Bezeld for reasons unknown.”

It all started with a child who was killed by a demon while playing in the mountains nearby.

Normally, demidemons needed to be summoned. Rumor had it that they freely roamed Kataart, but if true, they were an exception to the rule. Of course, that didn’t mean there was no such thing as “wild demons” out there. If a sorcerer summoned one for some experiment and then freed it, or summoned one and then croaked, the demon would remain in this world, wandering the wilderness and wreaking havoc in accordance with its base instincts.

So the townsfolk, assuming one such wild demon was responsible for the murder, put together a hunting party that sortied into the mountains. Now, these guys should’ve been more than capable of punking a brass demon or two, but the thing is... they never came back. And since then, there’d been repeated sightings of bands of demons in the area. The sorcerers’ council and the local army (of the Duchy of Kalmaart) had opened an investigation, but had yet to uncover the cause of it all.

That about summed up what Mileena told us.

By the time she was done telling the story, we were set up in a field a little ways from the burned-out village. We’d wanted to hit the next town or city to find lodgings, but the trek at this hour would’ve been grueling and the villagers were worried about the possibility of a second attack. And so the four of us had decided to camp out nearby for the night instead.

“I see. So this might be part of that demon horde on the move,” I surmised, and Mileena nodded in silent agreement. “But if they’re showing here, wouldn’t that suggest they’ve already torn through Bezeld?”

“I ain’t heard nothin’ about it myself,” Luke said, throwing some sticks into our shared campfire. “But, yeah, if they’re hittin’ villages this far out... there’s a good chance we get to Bezeld and find it’s a hole in the ground.”

“So if you’re still headed there anyway, then you think there’s some truth to the rumors about the sword, don’t you?”

“Er...” At this, Luke hesitantly scratched his cheek and turned to Mileena.

“You can tell her,” she said without a second thought.

Luke looked a little despondent for a moment before beginning, “Well, see... when we first started lookin’ into it, the demon problem wasn’t so bad. There was talk of a huntin’ party disappearin’ and something goin’ on in Bezeld, but that’s all. I dunno who started it, but somewhere along the line, the demon panic stories ended up gettin’ crossed with that old tale about a guy seein’ a weird sword in the Bezeld mines. And so this nonsense rumor started goin’ around that the sword was behind the demons somehow. Seems stupid to me. I mean, how could somethin’ like that cause somethin’ like this twenty years later? But I guess that’s rumors for you,” I grumbled.

I then continued, “Anyway, it was the rumors about the sword that got us curious. If it’s real, it’d be worth big bucks whether or not it’s got anythin’ to do with the demons. And we didn’t have nothin’ better to do, so even if it turned out to be a bust, we figured it was worth checkin’ out. So we followed the rumors back to Sherra... ’cept when we asked her about it, she froze up on us. Like she was hidin’ somethin’. And when someone starts actin’ that way, you gotta start to think there’s somethin’ to it. Speakin’ personally, anyway. So me an’ Mileena got ourselves a room in town to see if we could figure out what’s what. We were droppin’ by Sherra’s on the regular when—”

“The men in black showed up, followed by us, right?”

“Yeah, pretty much.” The fire let out a pop. “Not like I got any way to know what those guys are thinkin’... But some bigwig organization gettin’ involved makes the whole sword thing seem pretty legit.”

“Hmm, I see.”

“An’ it’s just been one thing after another since. Right when we started thinkin’ the sword was for-sure for-real, Sherra ditched us. We figured she was headin’ to Bezeld, so we figured we oughta head that way too... An’ here we are.” Luke cast a glance over at what remained of the village. “Now, lemme make one thing clear. Just ’cause I told you all this don’t make us a team. I only shared ’cause there ain’t no point in keepin’ it secret, but I ain’t plannin’ on makin’ nice with you.”

“No worries there. The thought never crossed my mind,” I said, waving my hand.

I had no intention of getting buddy-buddy with people I might have to fight down the line. Granted, before we ever got that far, we were going to have to sort out some pesky questions... like if the sword really existed, and if everyone’s favorite little ice queen really

had any claim to it.

But where was Sherra, the key to all this?

I silently woke in my cheap bed to a strange feeling in the air around me. I'd had the displeasure of waking to ill portents preceding ambushes a few times in the past, but this was different. I couldn't exactly describe *how* it was different, but... In the moment, it seemed like anything could be about to happen.

It was now two nights after the incident at the burning village. Me, Gourry, and the mercenary couple had since been traveling toward Bezeld together, and along the way, we'd crossed towns both large and small that had suffered from demidemon attacks. Any settlement in the area might fall victim next, including this place.

Anyway, I got out of bed and opened my window, letting cool night air into the room. The city skyline stood silent against a starry backdrop. There was only distant chatter on the wind, probably from a bar somewhere.

A peaceful nightscape. Nothing strange at all. Hmm? No, wait...

As I stared into the darkness, I caught a glimpse of movement in my peripheral vision. I quickly looked in that direction and strained my eyes, but saw nothing.

"Am I imagining things?" I whispered, and just then...

A silhouette darted through the moonlight! No, two... three of them! They were jumping from rooftop to rooftop. It was dark and they were far away, so I couldn't make them out well, but judging by their sizes, these weren't exactly stray cats on the move.

All righty! When curiosity comes calling, you gotta answer! It's not healthy to deprive yourself! I threw my cape on over my pajamas, grabbed my shortsword, and started chanting a spell.

"Levitation!" With that, I flitted out of the window and into the night.

The smallest of the three figures soundlessly landed on a roof ledge. By the time a second figure touched down, the first was already gone. In short order...

Whoosh! When the second figure leaped, there was a faint sound of something rushing through the air. The small figure out front then faltered.

"You fool! We were told not to kill her," hissed the third figure.

"I only hit her in the leg. That should slow her d—" the second started to argue.

But before he could finish, the small figure was racing across the rooftops once more. Both shadows pursuing her gawked at the sight.

"Huh?"

“You clearly missed! Let’s get her!”

Not on my watch! I thought that’d be a cool line to drop, but sometimes it’s better to show than tell, if you know what I mean. So instead...

“Lighting!” I dropped a max-brightness burst of magical light smack in front of the shadowy pursuers.

“Guh?!” they yelped, blinded by the sudden flash and recoiling in their tracks.

I knew both their voices. It was Gal-whatshisname and Zain, the assassin duo we encountered at Sherra’s place. I’d used my Levitation to get up above them and then plop my light spell down on them from out of nowhere. It was all too obvious, of course, who they were after.

“Mistress Lina?!” Sherra gasped, looking up at my hovering form in surprise.

I dismissed my Levitation spell and landed next to her. “Save the pleasantries for later. For the time being, I’ll—”

“Defeat us? Go ahead and try it,” Gal-whatshisname threatened as he and his companion began to move again. Neither made a sound as they dashed at us across the roof. It seemed they’d both recovered their sight already, as neither showed any sign of uncertainty in their movements.

“For now, let’s just get outta here! This way!” I said, taking off across the roof myself. Sherra followed close behind. I figured if I could lure them back to the inn, and wake Gourry and the others up—

Wuh?!

I suddenly sensed danger incoming on my six, so I took a little jump to the side.

Fwish! Something pierced through my cape from behind and kept sailing past me. He’d probably thrown a knife. One probably meant to kill.

As far as our pursuers were concerned, Sherra was worth more alive thanks to what she knew. But me? I was the definition of expendable. I was gonna have to do more than just run here!

“Freeze Arrow!” I altered the chant slightly to summon and fire a dozen icy bolts directly behind me. I’d figured fire arrows would be too easy to spot and dodge in the dark, see. But almost exactly as I unleashed my spell...

“Diem Wind!” Zain shouted.

What?!

Wind kicked up behind me, stirring my cape and hair. It was probably enough to blow my ice arrows off course. Had they anticipated my attack and prepared a spell to stop it?! If so, I should now expect...

“Freeze Arrow!”

Knew it! They'd waited until just after I attacked to have a go at me. Not that I didn't know how to handle this! I gave Sherra a big shove from the side.

"Gyaaaah!" she cried as she tumbled from the roof. I leaped down after her as the magical arrows sailed by, brushing my hair.

Ka-pwash! Sherra plunged head-first into a mountain of garbage in the alley below, while I landed neatly next to her.



“You okay, Sherra?!”

“Of course I’m not!”

“Okay, forget I asked for now! We gotta make tracks!”

“I actually think I’m safer *not* going with you—”

Cracka-cracka-crack! Interrupting Sherra’s muttering, a slew of ice arrows smashed into the ground from the roof and shattered.

“Whaaa?!” Spooked by the attack, she broke into a dash toward me. Girl must’ve realized this wasn’t the time for performative bickering!

“Let’s go! This way!” I said, sprinting off while whispering an incantation.

Sherra and I thus made our way through the dark alleyways. The guys in black were hot on our heels, leaping from roof to roof while peppering us with minor spells. Between dodging them and taking cover... I finally finished chanting my spell!

“Fireball!” I shot my ball of flame through a gap between roofs, straight up at the moon.

Of course, it wasn’t even close to hitting our pursuers. Instead...

“Break!” I shouted, and the moment I snapped my fingers—*Fwoooooom!*—my Fireball exploded in the night sky with a roar!

“Whaaat?!”

“What was that?”

Curious voices came from the various houses around us. The commotion had gotten the townsfolk’s attention.

Yes! Just as planned! It seemed to me that the men in black were on a covert mission of some kind, meaning they probably didn’t want to be seen. Drawing a crowd of villagers to the scene would surely scare them off. But...

“Fireball!”

Huh?! Before my brain could work out who’d cast the spell, I found myself leaping forward to dodge it. There was a violent blast of heat behind me, and the light of the flames painted the surrounding buildings red.

It was one of the guys in black! He’d unleashed that Fireball out of nowhere! Needless to say, I hadn’t expected them to start chucking spells like that in the middle of town... The fire quickly spread to the nearby houses.

“Are you crazy?! What do you people think you’re doing?!” I shouted at the men on the roof as I fled down the alley with Sherra. I thought it was a rhetorical question, but...

“It’s of no consequence to us. You, Lina Inverse, were the one who set fire to this city!”

“What?!” I cried out at this unexpected declaration.

Of course. After they beat me, their plan was to spread word that I'd been responsible for the blaze. But I wasn't about to let that happen!

I swiftly moved into my next spell, but before I could finish it, a man in black appeared in the alley ahead of us to block our path! When had he gotten off the roof?! I saw his hand move, and in response...

Tch! I made a half turn, grabbed the edge of my cape, and pulled it across me in a sweeping motion.

Thwipa-thwip! I felt a deadened impact. He'd probably thrown a couple of small knives or something, which I'd caught in my cape. And not a moment later, I finished my spell!

"Freeze Arrow!" My icy bolts surged forward, striking the man blocking our way. Not even he could dodge a dozen of these puppies!

"Guh!" He took one in the leg, freezing him to the ground.

All right! Now let's put him down for good!

But as I began my next incantation, I felt a hostile presence behind me—the other guy had gotten around us!

"Freeze Arrow!"

When I heard those words of power, I dove to the side and tackled Sherra, sending us both rolling along the ground.

"Hey!" she yelped.

Blah! Please save all complaints until the end of the ride! While Sherra was being kind of a drag right now, having her around also kept the men in black in check. As long as they wanted her alive, they wouldn't resort to anything too lethal. The throwing knives, the Freeze Arrows... Those were all clear signs of people holding back.

But as I managed to pick myself up in hopes of moving to counterattack...

"Freeze Arrow!" someone shouted, this time from the rooftop.

What?! Fore, aft, and now above? Are there three men in black?!

A split second of hesitation and shock slowed me down a little bit, but I nevertheless managed to push Sherra out of the way and dodge the incoming arrows at the same time.

"Icicle Lance!" I incanted, hurling my spell at the immobilized man in front of me. Since he couldn't evade it, he subsequently ended up frozen solid.

That's one down! While chanting my next spell, I broke into a run. The instant I did... I felt a sudden tug from behind that sent me pitching forward.

The heck was that?! I didn't sense anyone there at all! I glanced back over my shoulder to see something pinning the hem of my cape to the ground.

Darn it! I thought I'd dodged all those Freeze Arrows before, but

one had snared me. The second man in black on the ground took advantage of my momentary panic, pulling a knife or something from his pocket and raising it high.

Whump! He then collapsed to the ground and lay still. Behind him was...

“Gourry!”

“Hey. I heard there was a fight, so I came to check it out.” Sword in hand, he shot me a wink.

Cling! Clang! Just then, I heard the sound of swordplay from the rooftop. Following shortly, the last of our assailants fell down into the alley not far from where we stood.

“Cavalry’s here,” called a flippanant voice from on high.

No need to wonder who then landed next to us with a rush of wind—it was Luke and Mileena. With Gourry here too, we now had our full party! But I didn’t know how many more men in black were out there, so we couldn’t let our guard down just yet.

At any rate, I used my magic to create a small fire and free my cape from the frozen ground.

“Why don’t you guys give up already?” I asked the fallen men in black.

“Why should we?” one replied flatly. It sounded like Gal-whatshisname. He’d been smart about fleeing before, so if he was talking big now, did he have some trick up his sleeve?

“Sounds fun! Let’s finish this, then!” Luke rallied, readying his sword again. And just then...

Kra-koom! The wall of a house between us and the men in black collapsed with an explosive roar. We all leaped back instinctively.

“What?!”

Rrrrrr... As if to answer Luke’s question, a low growl came from the settling dust.

No, it wasn’t just in the dust. I could hear it behind us too, from the umbra of the alley. A number of presences were letting out an ominous noise. *It can’t be...*

I quickly chanted a spell, and... “Lighting!” I threw the magic light up high to dispel the darkness around us. The dust settled, the shadows receded, and we could finally see the arriving reinforcements.

It was about a dozen demidemons.

3: Move Fast! Early Bird Catches the Magic Sword!

“Whaaat?!” Sherra shouted in surprise as the demidemon goon squad appeared out of thin air. Yeah, guess anyone would be thrown for a loop by those brutes bursting onto the scene... Can’t say I wasn’t kinda shocked myself.

But maybe her scream ticked them off or something, because the demons all locked eyes on her. I heard Sherra gasp, even as I began a quiet spell recitation. But before I could pull it off...

“Hraaah!” The demons let out a collective howl. Countless flaming projectiles appeared in the air in front of the group, and then—*Brabababooshooshoosh!*—they rained down on us all at once!

Luke took the opportunity to slide forward, his blade now glowing faintly. Was that puppy magical?! He held it aloft and...

“Magic Wind Strike!”

Vwoosh! As his sword flashed through the air, the night wind howled into a Diem Wind-force gale! It easily blew back the deadly volley of fire.

“Heh,” Luke scoffed, turning back to us with his smug aura dialed up to ten. “You see that, Mileena? I just—”

“Could you save the boasting for later?” Mileena was quick with the brushoff, instantly deflating him.

While they went through their routine, I couldn’t help feeling a little awestruck. I hadn’t detected any sign of Luke chanting a spell just now. With nothing more than a swing of his sword and willpower, he’d gotten an effect on par with a Diem Wind spell...

Not bad for a magic sword! It might be a one-trick windy pony, sure, but any enchantment at all would allow a weapon to wound pure demons and other creatures resistant to physical attacks. Betcha I could buy it off him cheap!

But negotiations would have to wait until we took out the trash!

Mileena made the next move. “Astral Break!” she incanted, and the nearby lesser demon she smacked with it poofed into mist.

Meanwhile, Luke and Gourry readied their swords and charged enemies on either side of the alleyway. And it was right about then that I finished my spell!

“Zellas Bullid!” The ray of light it produced pierced through two demons at once. Then, abiding my will, it changed course midair and

slew one more before breaking apart in flight.

Gourry and Luke also managed to finish off their target demons in that time, leaving only—

“Above us!” Mileena suddenly cried out.

Not a second later, I sensed the presence overhead and leaped back. *Krnch!* I felt a rumble through the ground as something big landed nearby—another lesser demon! I hadn’t realized there were more baddies on the rooftops!

But more importantly, this one had jumped down smack in front of... Sherra! *Not good!* Neither Mileena nor I had a spell ready to go! The big demon swiped its right hand at Sherra, and...

Girl instantly sprang into action—but not to retreat! Instead, she stepped right into the demon’s personal space and slammed her right palm into its chest. *Thwack!* It didn’t look like an especially powerful strike, but a shudder ran through the lesser demon’s body, and—*Whump!*—it toppled backward lifeless.

Uh, wowzers.

“Say, Sherra, you’re not bad...” I whispered.

“Did I give you a reason to assume that I was?” she responded indignantly, flicking her dangling braid back over her shoulder.

When I stopped to think about it, she *had* been able to dodge the men in black’s attacks pretty lithely... But hey, knowing she could handle herself in a fight meant I could keep my focus on the battle at hand!

Let’s see, how many are left?

I cast a glance back at Gourry and called out, “Hey, how many more you got over there?!”

I was expecting him to say something like “two or three,” yet...

“I don’t know! There are two or three *here*, but...”

I hadn’t anticipated that last part. “*Here*”? *Does that mean...*

“Ditto!” Luke shouted, overhearing our exchange. “We ain’t the only ones with this problem... I think the whole town’s just swarmin’ with the bastards!”

The... The whole town? I wasn’t sure how he knew that, but this meant it was imperative to get the situation under control.

I began reciting a spell under my breath. “Lei Wing!” I incanted, rising straight into the air. Once I was high enough up, I took a look around and... “What?!” I found myself shouting. For a moment, I lost my concentration, causing my wind barrier to lurch to the side.

There were patches of flame all across the city. I couldn’t get the whole story from here, but if all of this was the handiwork of demons... then there must’ve been close to a hundred of them in the city limits. Given their sudden appearance in our vicinity, I’d assumed the men in black had summoned them, but it now seemed that wasn’t

the case.

It varied based on the caster's capacity, see, but two was usually the upper limit for how many demons a single sorcerer could summon and control at one time. In other words, coordinating a demon horde of this size would require forty to fifty casters, minimum. But if there were that many men in black around, why would they bother with the demons? They could just swarm us themselves.

By the same token, the demons' appearance had been far too abrupt for this to be some wild pack running rampant. If this was an invasion from the outside, someone would've noticed the horde coming and panic would've swept the city like a wave, with a clear point of origin. But from my bird's-eye view, the flames seemed to be evenly dispersed across the town.

What in the world...? As I was chewing all this over, I caught a glimpse of a small flicker out of the corner of my eye. I turned to look, half on reflex, and spotted a dark figure silhouetted by the light. Dang, another one of the guys in black?! That meant the light was...

Yup, dude chunked a Fireball right at me. Not a moment too soon, I used my spell to descend rapidly. And yet...

Bwoosh!

I wasn't sure if it had clipped my barrier or if something else set it off, but the Fireball burst over my head and scattered red flames everywhere. The explosive force slammed me into the nearest wall and then into the ground! It probably would've killed me if not for the protection of my barrier. The whole thing naturally left me a bit dizzy, but I dispelled my wreathing wind and managed to right myself.

"Careful, guys! We're not done with the men in black yet! They're trying to take advantage of the chaos to finish us off!" I shouted in warning to my comrades. The enemy's plan was a smart one. Under these circumstances, the wannabe assassins could wreak all the havoc they wanted and blame any collateral damage on the demons.

"They're on the roofs as well?" Mileena asked.

"Yeah. I just saw one," I responded.

"Then they take priority. What if I fly while you shoot?" she proposed.

"You got it!" I agreed, and we both began our respective chants.

She finished hers first and put a hand on my shoulder, then released the words of power: "Levitation!" She must have added some personal touches to her incantation, because we rose into the air much faster than a normal Levitation would take us—just shy of Lei Wing speeds.

We were up above the rooftops in the blink of an eye. I glanced all around and... *There!* Between the silver moonbeams and crimson light of the fires, a dark figure on a roof stood out from the black of night.

We headed straight for it, and I let my spell fly!

“Dam Blas!”

Kerkrash! The man in black leaped to the side just before I blew a patch of roof out from under him. Except—*Pwop!*—the roof where he landed gave out under his weight!

I’d used the power of my talismans to enhance that Dam Blas, see, which increased its destructive power. If you tried to dodge one of those puppies like you would a normal Dam Blas, you were in for a rude awakening.

“Ngh!” The man stumbled forward in an attempt to regain his balance, but it didn’t work. Off the roof he went, and though he managed to land on his feet...

Kraboboboboom! A lesser demon standing nearby showered him in flaming arrows!

“Urgh!” Nobody could dodge a volley like that at such close range immediately after landing, and so the man was swallowed by flame. But that wasn’t the end... *Fwoom!* He must have been carrying hidden explosives or something, because he blew into smithereens, catching the nearby demon in the blast.

Still, if the demidemons were attacking the men in black too, that confirmed that they weren’t under their summoned control. I could only guess there were more guys in black out there, but I couldn’t sense any in the immediate area at the moment. Thus Mileena and I touched back down at a leisurely speed.

“We finished off most of ’em over here!” Luke shouted, as if he’d been waiting for us.

“Same here!” Gourry seemed to have done his part as well.

But this wasn’t the only alleyway teeming with demons. “Okay!” I rallied. “Then let’s get a move on and show the rest of these suckers who’s boss!”

“Yeah!” Everyone heartily agreed to my plan. All except one, that is...

“Huh?!” exclaimed Sherra.

“Hahh... Morning, guys,” I yawned, rubbing at my sleepy eyes as I came downstairs.

“It’s past noon,” Mileena replied in her usual monotone voice. She, Gourry, Sherra, and Luke were all sitting around the table already.

“Gimme a break. I didn’t get to sleep until first light. Excuse me, sir... I’ll have a chicken steak set and a simmered fish combo. And a noodle soup too, pretty please!” With charm to the nines, I put in a light breakfast order with the tavern owner and took a seat next to Gourry.

We'd spent last night—or more precisely, earlier this morning—cleaning out demons until dawn broke in the eastern sky. Obviously, we hadn't taken care of 'em all ourselves. Following the incident in Bezeld and the ensuing rash of attacks on nearby villages, large towns like this one had started posting soldiers and casters from the sorcerers' council for protection.

Between them and us, we'd managed to put a stop to the demonic rampage. There was substantial damage to the city, but fortunately, the inn where we were staying was untouched. Unfortunately, however...

"Those jerks in black still got away," Luke muttered bitterly as he poked at his cream-sautéed flounder with a fork.

"Yeah, true... About the only thing we accomplished was saving Sherra," I agreed with a nod.

"*Saving me?*" Sherra glared at me. "You mean pushing me off a roof and pitting me against demons?"

Aha! Someone's holding a teensy bit of a grudge, I see! "Well, that was just... Oh, yeah! Because I knew you could handle it!"

"Did you?" She glared at me even harder.

"Well, all that aside..." Gourry interrupted. He then looked Sherra in the eyes and asked, "Could you tell us what's going on already?"

"Urgh..." Sherra let out a soft groan, averting her eyes slightly.

But Gourry continued to stare straight at her and said, "I'm sure Lina explained everything to me earlier, but I wasn't listening, so..."

Splat! The words coming out of his mouth were so outrageous that I face-planted straight on the table. "Y-You weren't listening to me?!"

"Nope! Hahaha..." Gourry rubbed the back of his head bashfully. "I guess I might have been listening at the time, but if I was, I've forgotten... So six of one, you know?"

"Quit grinning like that! Are you saying you never actually think about anything and just follow my lead all the time?!"

"Pretty much!"

"I told you to quit grinning!"

Crack! My fury-driven elbow ground its way deep into Gourry's temple.

"Ngh!"

"Okay, big guy, here's the quick and dirty! We're trying to find you a new magical sword, so we're trying to get Sherra, who probably has one, in our debt! If things go well, we might even get it from her for free!"

"That is quick and dirty," Sherra chimed in, and... was it just my imagination that her gaze was turning even more hostile? Meh, details.

"Now, all joking aside," I said, turning my gaze back to Sherra.

“Oh? So you were just joking?” she harped.

But I ignored her and continued: “I can imagine you’ve got your reasons, and that they’re complicated. I’m sure there are things you want to keep private too. But you have to see... your personal preferences aren’t the most important thing at stake anymore.”

Sherra said nothing, and just turned up her nose.

I pressed her, “Come on, Sherra. Isn’t it possible they’re connected? I mean the thing you don’t want to talk about and... Look, I’m just gonna say it outright. I’m talking about the sword in Bezeld and the appearance of the demons.”

“What?!” Luke barked out, and Mileena raised an eyebrow. Of course Gourry, who didn’t understand any part of the situation, had no reaction whatsoever. As for Sherra...

“Hahh...” She let out a deep sigh.

Silence then fell over the table for a time. As if waiting for that lull in our conversation, the owner brought me my order, but rather than reaching for it, I kept my eyes locked on Sherra.

““That sword,” she began at last after a long spell, “‘shouldn’t exist.’ That’s what my father always said whenever he got drunk...”

So there is a sword! I just barely restrained myself from grabbing Sherra by the collar and shaking her while demanding to know where it was, and instead kept all quiet and listen-y.

“He said that it creates demons, and that it must never be unleashed upon the world.”

“A sword that creates... demons?” The rest of us exchanged a glance at those words.

“Yes. He never told me the whole story, but if what my father said means the sword is connected to the outbreak of demons... then perhaps something is activating the sword’s power and causing all of this. And if that’s the case, I have to do something about it,” she said, that last line a whisper that sounded like she was trying to convince herself more than she was us.

“I see... So you’re headed to Bezeld to try to stop things yourself,” I observed.

She nodded firmly in response.

“But do you actually know how to do that?” Mileena asked quietly.

“W-Well...” Sherra pursed her lips and looked down. Normally this would’ve led to another awkward silence, but...

“Okay, Sherra honey, you just leave this to us! We’ll totally find a way!” Luke proclaimed confidently, thumping his chest.

“Do you have any basis for saying that?” Mileena asked practically.

“None!” Luke replied firmly and immediately. “But I’m gonna

make it happen! 'Cause that's how real men roll!"

"Poppycock," she said, then smiled slightly. "Utter poppycock... but I like your style," she admitted.

"You do?!" Luke asked, eyes shining. "Does this mean... our feelings are finally mutual?!"

"Stop joking around and let's get back to the matter at hand."

"J-Koking? You..." Her chilly reception made Luke tear up for a moment, but soon enough... "Fine! Even if you don't return my love now, you will someday! And I ain't gonna give up till it happens!" he bellowed loud enough for the whole restaurant to hear.

Would you knock it off, dude? I got a major case of secondhand embarrassment... Everyone's staring now too...

"A-Anyway, if the 'making demons' part is literal and that sword really is the cause of the demon attacks..." I couldn't take any more of Luke's awkward antics, so I quickly changed the subject. "I'm not surprised some king or local lord is sending those spec ops guys after it."

"How come?" Gourry asked.

"How come? For military purposes, of course! It's perfect."

"Military purposes? But doesn't holding the sword make demons appear? Seems like a dangerous thing to take back to your homeland to me..."

"Well, duh. That's why you do the opposite. First, you smuggle the sword into enemy territory and flood 'em with demons. Next, you kick back while the buggers wreak havoc on your foe's military and political structures. Then you wait for the right time to send in your army, or annex the territory in the name of 'offering aid,' or whatever you want. Way cheaper than a straight-up war."

"I... I get it! Man, you're the best at coming up with evil schemes, Lina. I mean... Er, never mind," Gourry said, trailing off after noticing my angry glare.

"Just what I'd expect from mega-villain Lina Inverse, always leavin' chaos in her wake," Luke chimed in immediately.

"Who're you callin' a mega-villain?!"

"I think I made myself pretty clear."

"You—"

"But enough messin' around," he said, moving on before I could finish objecting. "Of course, this is all assumin' the sword is real. I ain't lettin' those guys in black have it if it is."

"Er, well... I suppose we're of the same mind there." I didn't like rolling over, but I couldn't pick a fight now that the guy had put on a sincere facade. So with no other recourse, I nodded in agreement.

"So, far as that goes, I got a proposal to make."

"A proposal?"

“Yeah. First, Sherra, I gotta ask. I figure if we manage to find the sword and stop the demons, you don’t much care what happens to it afterward, yeah? So long as it ain’t used for evil. Like, you’re cool if one of us takes it?”

“Well, I suppose... I can’t pay you in exchange for your help, so I suppose you’d find that better than nothing,” Sherra replied, agreeing readily enough to Luke’s suggestion.

Does she even realize what kind of coin magical swords fetch? Maybe she thinks no one’ll put up the cash for a sword that summons demons...

“Okay, that’s one down,” Luke said, snapping his fingers and turning back to me. “Now here’s a question for you guys. Say there really is a magic sword and we manage to find it... There’s no way you’re gonna split the loot with us fair and square, right?”

“Probably not,” I admitted with a firm nod. We wanted the sword to use it, after all. There wasn’t really a way to split it, even if we wanted to. I mean, we could hypothetically pay them half the sword’s market value to “buy” their share of it—I just wasn’t a big fan of that plan.

“Right, so here’s my offer. The five of us work together to fight off the black cloaks,” he continued.

“I thought you weren’t here to make nice?” I asked.

“Just hear me out, okay? We’ll work together to fight off the men in black. Then, when it comes to the sword... Well, I figure we can work together to stop the demon hordes too. Then once the danger’s all wrapped up, if the sword is still there for the taking, we race to see who gets it first. Finders keepers, no hard feelings. How about it?”

Hmm... so that was his game. I thought it over for a while before saying, “Okay, there’s one thing I want to make sure of first. It’s possible we may have to break the sword to stop the demons. Would you be willing to do it?”

Kkkrrk! For a brief but very obvious moment, I saw a wince cross Luke’s face. Understandable, of course. He clearly wanted to sell the sword off. You couldn’t exactly offload a demidemon-summoning sword on the open market, but there were plenty of channels you could go through to get top coin for such things. Meanwhile, Gourry and I were after a magical sword we could actually use—and one that constantly summoned demons wasn’t exactly our first choice. In other words, what I was suggesting would be far less of a loss to us than to them.

“W-Well...” As predicted, Luke hesitated to respond. But he quickly changed his tune when he saw Sherra glaring at him. “O-Of course I’d break it! Puttin’ an end to all this is goal number one, right? Ah... hahaha!” he laughed desperately.

“Okay, then I agree to your terms,” I said. “What about you,

Sherra? Are you in?"

"Of course. Stopping the demons is all I care about. You'll find the sword in the abandoned mine in the mountain north of Bezeld. I'll tell you more when we arrive."

"All righty! Then it's truce time until we reach Bezeld! And no trying to get the jump on the other team. Now, Luke, if you don't mind me asking... that sword you have is magical too, right?"

"Hmm? Yeah. Ain't got a name or a history, though."

Aha, thought so! Time to start negotiations! With a little luck, I could land it cheap! "Then have I got a deal for you! I'm diggin' deep for this, but I'll take it off your hands for, let's say... five-thirty!"

Blarghsplat! For some strange reason, my rather generous offer had both Luke and Mileena falling out of their chairs.

"What kind of price is that?!" he shouted.

"Heh. It's more than what I'd usually offer," I replied with a sweet smile.

"And what's that?! Nothing?!" he continued, his displeasure on full display.

Despite Luke's accusation, I'd once offered Gourry five-fifty for the Sword of Light. He hadn't taken it, of course... But if the Sword of Light was worth five-fifty, then I sure as heck wasn't gonna offer one coin more for some measly magic sword of unknown providence! That's mercantile common sense 101. Well, okay, some might call it dirty dealing, but still!

"FYI, I don't have it anymore, but I did get my last magical sword for free—with Gourry thrown in to boot."

"Hey..." Gourry gave me a dirty look. Apparently not even he could let that one slide.

"Well... I ain't sellin' it for that..." Luke struggled his way back to a seated position. "But for fifty-three *billion*, maybe."

Ker-thud! It was my turn to pitch over.

"B-Billion...?" I whispered as I managed to right myself. I'd met one brave soul in the past who'd dared to up my bid by a factor of ten thousand, but a hundred freakin' million? That was something else.

"S-So you're saying... no sale, huh?"

"Not for a joke price, nah," he sniffed.

Urgh... If you insist, then... I'd just have to set my sights on the magic sword in Bezeld! I could always buy it off them if they beat us to it, but it'd be free if we could nab it ourselves! The difference between those two outcomes was night and day given the going rate for magical swords, which just left one question: who was gonna get their hands on the goods first?

No, there was actually a more pressing issue at hand... Was there even really a sword to begin with? Thinking things through rationally,

that was a pretty big assumption. The only evidence we had to back up its existence were the words of Sherra's drunk father, meaning it was entirely possible that this whole thing was a wild goose chase and the demons had nothing to do with it.

But, hey, stewing over the possibilities wasn't gonna get us anywhere, so that was that as far as I was concerned. With all kinds of unanswered questions, we moved forward with our fair-weather alliance.

An air of hardship hung over Bezeld. Natural, given its status as the epicenter of the demon attacks. Maybe the city was on high alert for another raid, because there were no stalls set up along the avenue and a great number of houses and shops were boarded up, their owners perhaps long evacuated. The important spots around town were tightly guarded by stern-faced soldiers. Even though it was the middle of the day, few people were walking the streets, and those that were remained eerily quiet. It was like the entire city was huddled up in fear...

That was the atmosphere I'd been expecting, but in fact... Bezeld was the very image of tranquility. I was floored to see stalls lining the thoroughfare, carriages coming and going, shops bustling with noise, kids playing in the streets. Okay, so maybe there *were* a few more posted soldiers and sorcerers than you'd normally see... but that was about the only sign something was up.

According to the innkeep where we were staying, the threat of a second demon attack had indeed shuttered the city for a while... but the stories of raids on surrounding settlements suggested that danger was just as prevalent anywhere they might try to flee. If anything, the concentration of soldiers in Bezeld made it seem safer than most, and I suspected the majority of folks didn't have anyplace else to go even if they did skip town. The result was only a minor exodus, and though I could understand the logic at play...

The city just seems way too relaxed. That's what I couldn't help thinking as I gazed out my window that night.

The magical glow of the street lamps pierced the darkness here and there, and I could hear the clamoring din of nearby bars. It wasn't quite the middle of the night yet, but it was certainly past dinnertime. If the citizenry caught any whiff of danger, they'd be locked up tight in their houses... yet from what I could see, people were still walking the roads without a care. The inn where we were staying had quite a few folks coming and going too, and...

"Hmm?" I scowled and leaned forward as I spied a small figure leaving the inn. I only saw her from behind, but I was sure it was Sherra.

There was a good chance the guys in black were camped out here in Bezeld. She had to know that too, so what was she doing sneaking out at this hour? As I pondered the answer, I recalled what the old innkeep back in Sherra's old village had told me about her after we first met.

Maybe she really was born here in Bezeld...

My mind began to churn with questions. Sherra seemed to have a complicated past, so I hadn't done much prying into her early life. But now that I thought about it, I didn't know anything about her mother, much less her hometown. There was a lot I didn't know about her, actually...

.....

After a moment's hesitation, I threw on my cape, left my room, ran downstairs, and departed the inn. What was I doing, you ask? Is that even a question? I was going after Sherra, of course!

And so you don't get the wrong idea about my motivations, let me make this clear: I wasn't following her out of idle curiosity or anything. My only goal was to protect her from the men in black. What's that, you say? "Why tail her in secret, then?" Okay, so maybe I was a little curious to find out where she was going... A maiden's heart has many facets, y'know?

I stepped outside and scanned the area... Aha! Even from the door, I could spy Sherra passing quietly through the faint light of the street lamps. I slipped into the night after her.

She darted down the main thoroughfare for a good ways before eventually ducking onto a side street. I couldn't see her face or anything, but she was sure moving like she was in a hurry. She immediately took the next corner and entered a dingy old alleyway. It's hard to say if it was because she was hustling or because she was distracted, but for some reason, she didn't look back even once.

She was gradually moving away from the city center and toward the slums. The light from the bars was now nowhere to be seen, and the darkness was growing thicker. *Hmm... I'm not liking the looks of this*, I thought, but continued to follow her anyway. Eventually, Sherra abruptly stopped in her tracks. Had she realized I was tailing her? Couldn't be...

"Hey there, little missy. What're you doing out at this hour?"

Ah, it seemed she'd hit a roadblock consisting of four ne'er-do-wells.

"It ain't safe, a girl walkin' around all by herself... How's about we take you home, eh?" suggested the bearded one with a lecherous grin. His speech was a touch slurred like he'd been drinking.

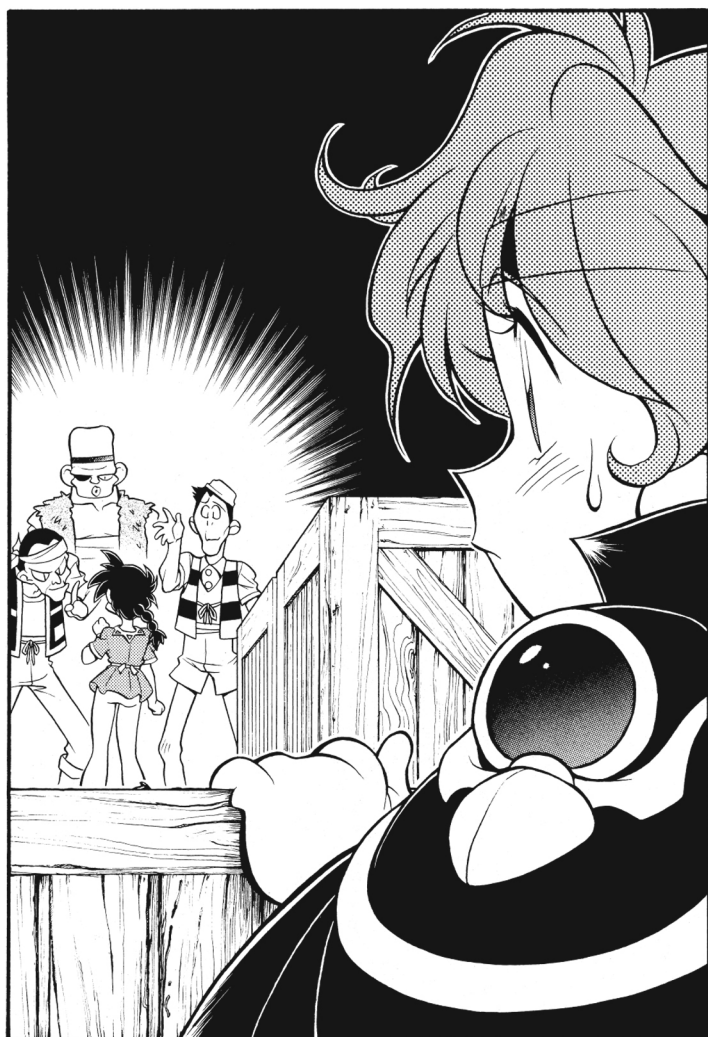
"I'm in a hurry. Please let me through," Sherra insisted.

"I'm in a huwwy. Pwease let me ththrough," she says. Ain't that

cute!” the man laughed, although I didn’t see what was so funny.
“Why not drop whatever yer plannin’ and spend a widdle time with us instead?”

“...I’m in a hurry. Please let me through,” Sherra said again, a slight edge to her voice this time.

Yikes. Putting the moves on Sherra, not knowing what she was capable of... Poor bastards, am I right?



“C’mon, baby. Be a sport.” The bearded man reached for Sherra...

Her right hand moved in a flash. She swatted his arm, then drove a backfist into his face. That’s what I’d anticipated, at least... but before she could land a hit, the guy disappeared!

Huh?!

“Ngh!” It wasn’t him, but Sherra who groaned and buckled. The bearded man caught her as she pitched forward limply.

Sherra had indeed thrown her fist out at the guy, but he’d ducked back and struck her right in the solar plexus. Of course, there was no way some drunken ne’er-do-well was capable of a move like that— which could mean only one thing.

I quickly charged out, a chant on my lips. And the second I did...

“Flare Arrow!” incanted two of the men who’d thus far been silent!

“Waaah!” I ducked into a nearby alley to dodge both attacks. They must have realized I was shadowing Sherra.

“You can fight these two, Lina Inverse, while we take the girl,” the bearded man said in a different voice—one I now recognized.

“Zain!”

Yup. The bearded man, who looked like your average good-for-nothing drunk at a glance, was really Zain the black cloak.

Stupid me! Who’d have thought these sneaksters would suddenly unmask themselves and present like common troublemakers? While I was kicking myself, Zain hoisted Sherra onto his shoulder, turned around, and took off down the alley with the fourth black cloak. The other two were staying behind to hold me off, I guess!

I quickly chanted a spell, placed a hand on a nearby wall, and let ’er rip! “Van Layl!”

From my hand, icy vines spiraled forth along the wall and the ground. Anyone who touched them would be caught in their frigid grip. If lucky, they’d only be stopped in place. If unlucky, they’d be frozen solid. And yet...

“Flare Arrow!” One of the men fired a spell that easily melted my approaching tendrils.

Of course! He’d chanted it in advance to either drive me back or negate whatever I was casting. These guys really were trying to hold me off! In that case, it was time for a new spell.

“Diem Wind!” I cried, releasing a robust gust of wind. It was normally only strong enough to buffet someone, but this one was amplified by my talismans—not to mention the fact that I was casting it in a narrow alleyway.

Whoooooosh!

A much more powerful blast than they were expecting drowned

out their screams and blew the two goons clean back.

Yes! I sprung out of the alley where I'd been hiding and ran off in the direction I'd seen Zain disappear, but the road soon forked ahead. Was I supposed to go left or right?! I was hesitating over just that when...

"Freeze Arrow!" I heard a voice call as a wave of hostility washed over me.

I jumped back instantly with a yelp of surprise. Not a second later, ten arrows of cold pierced the ground where I'd just been standing. I quickly looked up to see a man standing on the roof of an old house—the same one who'd run off with Zain before. So these guys were still trying to hold me off, huh?!

Zain was probably pretty far ahead of me by now, which meant I didn't have a whole lot of time to waste on this guy. Still, it would be too dangerous to ignore him and just keep running. That being the case...

I began chanting a Lei Wing spell to create a barrier of wind that would protect me from most attack spells and allow me to bust outta here at top speed. But before I could even finish my incantation, the man on the roof turned his back on me and vanished.

Crap! That must mean Zain's long gone...

"So what the hell are we s'posed to do now?!" Luke shouted angrily, loudly striking the table.

After Zain had made off with Sherra, I'd used Levitation to scan the area from the air, but was unable to find them. The two guys I'd blown away with my Diem Wind had disappeared at some point too, leaving me bupkis in the way of leads. I knew searching on my lonesome would be a waste of time, so I'd since returned to the inn to explain the situation to everyone. The news sent Luke into a rage.

"And in case yer thinkin' about tryin' it, you ain't apologizin' yer way outta this one! Those guys wanna know what Sherra knows—and who knows what they might do to her to get that info! What're you gonna do if somethin' happens to her, huh?!"

"Hrk..." Of course, I had no comeback for that. I really should've alerted the others the minute Sherra'd slipped out of the inn, after all. At the very least, I should've kept my wits about me when Zain, pretending to be a drunkard, had first accosted her. If only I had, we wouldn't be in this mess.

"Chasin' her down 'cause you got curious like some common gossipmonger..." Luke continued to grumble.

"We can assign blame another time," Mileena said quietly, interrupting him. "What's imperative now is working together to find her."

“Y-Yeah... Okay, fine, you’re right! I’ll save the tongue-lashin’ for later! Take us to where this all went down!”

“You got it!” Obviously, I wasn’t about to argue with that plan. It was the whole reason I’d come back in the first place...

And so the four of us flew out into the night-cloaked city to rescue the kidnapped Sherra.

“It was right here,” I said, stopping at the fork where I’d been showered with Freeze Arrows. “The guy who took Sherra definitely went this way. He was carrying her too, so—I don’t care how well-trained he is—he couldn’t have been moving too fast. They’ve gotta be hiding out nearby!”

“All right, then let’s split up! We’ll go right! You guys go left! You find anything, you send up a magical flare!” Luke ordered and, without waiting for a response from us, headed right with Mileena.

“Okay, Gourry, let’s get searching too!”

“Right!” he replied eagerly as we headed left. “But Lina, even if their hideout’s not far, finding it’s gonna be tough.”

“Yeah, you’re right,” I admitted. We were surrounded by decrepit houses, though it was hard to say if they were all abandoned or not. Some had basements, and some had attics too. There was a good chance Zain and his goons were set up *somewhere* around here though, so tracking them down was going to be like searching for a needle in a haystack...

“But even if it’s gonna be hard, we’ll leave no stone unturned! Let’s start with this place!” I pointed straight at the first empty house in front of me. I drew my shortsword, cast a light spell on the blade, and... “Dam Blas!”

Bwoom! I blasted the front door in, and we darted inside to begin our search!

.....

Well, not like I was expecting to hit paydirt on the first strike.

“That one next!” I said, pointing to a second house.

“Say, Lina... why did Sherra go out on her own anyway?”

“Dunno. You’d have to ask her. Whatever the reason, it must’ve been pretty important for her to sneak out despite the danger. Or maybe she’s just overconfident in her ability to defend herself. It’s also possible there’s still more to all this than we know. But either way, we won’t learn the truth until we find her.”

The second house was a bust too, and so was the third. Bashing in the front door, running to see if there was a basement, and *then* searching the attic was a pain, so I’d just started blasting up through the ceiling. We went through that routine a couple of times, until...

“Okay, on to the next one,” I said, pointing to the next abandoned

house, when all of a sudden... a bright light appeared in the sky nearby! “Huh?!” It was a Lighting spell! That had to be Luke’s and Mileena’s signal, meaning they’d found something! Aha! “Let’s go, Gourry!”

“Right!”

We gave each other a nod, then took off at the exact same time toward the origin of the light.

We saw a flash through a darkened window. By the time we arrived at the signal’s location, it appeared a fight was already underway.

We’d found ourselves at a housing complex of some kind, a three-story building made of brick. The sporadic flashes of light from attack spells were visible from the third-floor windows. I would’ve liked to fly up there with a Levitation or Lei Wing spell, but the windows were too small to fit through with a Lei Wing barrier, and Levitation was such a slow ascent that we’d be sitting ducks if we chose the wrong point of entry. We were just gonna have to kick down the front door like normal people or something.

Gourry and I ran toward the entrance to find it already smashed in—most likely the work of Team Luke. From here, I couldn’t detect any enemies in our immediate vicinity. We thus charged in as the fight continued to unfold floors above us. I found the stairs and rushed all the way up, when...

Vroosh!

“Wha?!” I’d just barely poked my head over the top of the staircase when a beam of light came streaking toward me. After passing right in front of my eyes, it smashed through the wall beyond. *A Dam Blas? Whew, that was a close one!*

“Took you long enough!” Luke called. “We beat two of ’em... but they’re tenacious bastards!”

Now that I was at the top of the stairs, I could see a hallway stretching out to my left. It was lined with doors on either side, and I could see Luke and Mileena hiding behind one just across the hall ahead. It seemed there were still a few men in black down the hall too.

“Any enemies on the other floors?!”

“Nope! Just here!”

Okay, so all we had to do was polish off the stragglers. “Then let’s finish ’em off already!” I shouted.

“Yeah, right! It’s as easy as that, huh?” Luke snapped back (like a wuss).

The enemy was casting intermittent attack spells, taking full advantage of the length of the hallway. Running straight at them

would be suicide under the circumstances. The baddies likely had Sherra with them too, so I couldn't just blow the whole place to bits with a big, flashy spell. But when Lina Inverse puts her brains and her magic to good use, anything's possible!

I poked my head around the corner and was greeted by a Freeze Arrow. "Yikes!"

I quickly ducked back to let the spell fly past, but now I had an idea of the enemy's general position. There were two guys at the end of the hallway, one in a room on each side.

Okay, got me a plan! Now let's put it into action! With that, I turned around and ran back down the stairs!

"Hey! Get back here, cowards!" Luke called from behind us, but I ignored him. I didn't have time to spell my brilliance out for his benefit.

"Hey, Lina, what's the plan?" Gourry asked as he ran alongside me.

"Get your sword ready and take out any bad guys you see!" I shouted back simply.

"Huh? But there weren't any enemies downstairs..."

"Just do it!" I said, and began chanting a spell.

Typical of housing complexes, the layout of the second floor was identical to the third—a long, straight hallway lined with doors. I ran down to the end, opened the last door, and unleashed my spell! "Dam Blas!" I was aiming at the ceiling, of course. Directly up at one of the guys on the floor above.

Crash!

"Bwah!" I could hear a scream over the explosion as a man in black fell to the floor nearby, covered in rubble.

"Oh, I get it now!" Gourry exclaimed, quickly followed by a flash of his sword.

Okay, one down! I began chanting another spell, and in short order... "Dam Blas!"

Crash!



I smashed through the ceiling like I had before. But this time, all I got was rubble... and a man in black staring down at me through the hole I'd created. "Fool! You thought that trick would work twice?" he mocked.

Ha! Who's the fool here?

Shnk! Dude was met with a sword slash that took him down so fast that it was frankly anticlimactic. He'd moved over after seeing the floor collapse beneath his companion, thinking he'd be dodging an identical attack... But Luke was up on the third floor watching too. He knew the other man in black would move, momentarily distracting him from spellcasting. Luke had taken that opportunity to dash down the hall and cut the dude down while he was still looking down on me through the hole.

"How are things up there?" I asked.

Luke looked around and replied, "I think that's the last of 'em. No sign of Sherra, though."

"What?!" I whipped back around and darted up the stairs once more, reconnecting with Team Luke.

Rations and travel bags were scattered around the place. The black cloaks were clearly using this as a base of operations. But Luke was right—Sherra wasn't here.

"You think they got another hideout somewhere?" he growled in frustration.

Hmm... I glanced over the things in the room once more and said, "I doubt it. I think Sherra was here until just recently."

"What? She was?!" Luke shouted.

"Do you see some of her belongings?" Mileena asked me.

I shook my head. "No, this stuff clearly all belongs to the men in black. But the quantity suggests there are about ten guys, and we only took four out here. That begs the question—if half the men in black left their base with Sherra, where did they go? And the most likely answer is..."

"Ah!" Luke exclaimed.

"Of course!" Mileena likewise gasped in realization.

Now that they were both on the same page with me, Gourry was the only one still in the dark.

"Yup." I nodded firmly. "They're headed for the mountain to the north. To the sword sleeping in the mines of Bezeld."

4: And Now, the Sleeping Sword Awakens

Birds of unknown species called and rows of trees blended into the darkness. If not for the moon and the light at the tip of my sword, the mountain nightscape would quite literally have been as black as pitch.

I know traveling a mountain road in the dark with the possibility of lurking demidemons isn't what most would describe as "sane," but there was no way I was just gonna kick back like, "Well, the mountains are scary, so let's wait until morning, teehee!" Not when it seemed likely that the men in black had taken Sherra this way. She'd once told us that the sword lay deep in an abandoned mine on the mountain north of Bezeld, and that's exactly where we were headed.

"But... you think the men in black actually came through here?" Luke muttered, trying to cover for his nervousness—or perhaps just genuinely doubting it. "What if they really do got another base and they just ain't made their move yet? Or what if this ain't the right mountain? Gettin' jerked around like that can send a man down a dark path."

"Do you think you're walking the path of light now?"

"Guh!" Luke whimpered, apparently vulnerable to criticism from Mileena. "C'mon, babe. I'm livin' an honest life now! All so we can do the happily-ever-after thing!" he continued with a goofy grin.

"That is not an end goal we share."

Her heartless brush-off silenced Luke and brought tears streaming from his eyes.

"Okay, enough lovers' bickering for now," I interrupted. "We should reach the mine any minute."

"I assure you there's no love involved here," Mileena replied indignantly.

Dang, Luke doesn't have a prayer!

Soon enough, we came out of the forest and stared in shock at the view that opened up before us—a sheer cliff face towering upward. Sherra was right about this mountain being home to an abandoned mine. But the rock wall was covered in holes of all sizes, each one suggesting the entrance to a different shaft. There were at least ten, and that was just what we could see from our current location. Given that there could be more entrances all over the mountain and that the shafts themselves could branch within, just how much searching were

we going to have to do?

“W-Well... guess we’ve established that there’s really a mine,” Luke whispered as he stared, while Mileena nodded in silent amazement.

“So, which one do we go in?” Gourry asked the forbidden question. Unsurprisingly, he received no answer.

Well, it was true that Sherra had never said anything about there only being *one* mine... And thinking about it rationally, if there had been an orichalcum rush, I should’ve expected more than just a handful of holes in the mountainside.

Hmm... What to do, what to do?

“Huh...”

“This is a toughie...”

“...”

Me, Luke, and Mileena all furrowed our brows and crossed our arms in turn.

“Hey, Lina. That one looks pretty likely, right?” Gourry casually interrupted the tense atmosphere, pointing at one particular hole in the rockface. It was dark and far away, so it was hard to make out, but I didn’t notice anything out of the ordinary myself...

“Likely? How, exactly?” I had to ask.

“I think I see a scrap of cloth caught on the entrance.”

“Huh?” I strained my eyes... and still couldn’t see it. “Where?”

“I’m telling you, there. Look! Don’t you see it?”

Luke and Mileena squinted in that direction, but likewise didn’t seem to see anything.

“Okay! Debating it won’t get us anywhere. Let’s head up and take a look. We’re no worse off if it turns out he’s wrong,” I suggested, and the group agreed.

The entrance Gourry had pointed out was on the higher side of the cliff, meaning finding a path up would take too damn long. Instead, I chanted a spell and placed a hand on Gourry’s shoulder.

“Levitation!”

After we lifted off the ground, Luke and Mileena each cast Levitation for themselves and rose up into the night air behind us.

“Okay. A little more to the right, then straight,” Gourry offered.

I directed our flight in accordance with his instructions, and before long, our little procession reached the mine entrance in question. And at that entrance...

“You’re right,” I whispered, picking up the handkerchief caught on a rocky protrusion.

“Gotta say, I’m impressed you could spot that from down there,” Luke remarked in astonishment.

“Aw, shucks...” Gourry laughed, scratching at his head.

The handkerchief looked new enough with no sign of weathering. In other words...

"Either Sherra left this here to signal us, or the men in black planted it to throw us off track... It's a tough call," I sighed.

Mileena then chanted a quiet spell, producing a small point of magical light on her fingertip. Brandishing that, she squatted down and examined the shaft floor for a while, before standing back up and saying, "I see signs of someone passing through here. Multiple someones."

"Really?!"

"Yes," she proclaimed with confidence.

"Okay! Then let's get a move on!"

The four of us took off running down the shaft. Luke took the lead, casting a magical light on the tip of his drawn sword. Mileena followed close behind, then me, then Gourry. We didn't make it far before we hit a fork in the road.

"Which way?" Luke asked Mileena.

She scanned the ground for a time and quietly pointed right. We then took off running once more. Probably due to greedy people digging for orichalcum every-which-way, the mine shaft twisted and turned like a maze. If Mileena was on the money, the signs of recent passage were leading us deeper and deeper into the mountain.

Just how far ahead of us had the men in black gotten? It was possible that Sherra was stalling them, but if not, then they might've already gotten their mitts on the sword. I mean, even if they had, as long as we crossed paths, we could still push 'em over and swipe the dang thing, but...

After who-knows-how-long running through tunnels—*Rrr... Rrrumblecrash!*—a vibration, like some distant earthquake, set the whole shaft shaking. And it sounded like it was coming from right up ahead! The four of us shared a glance and a nod, then resumed our race further into the mine.

"There they are!" I cried out after a good sprint.

I could now see a stream of magical light coming from around the bend. Of course, this meant the bad guys would be able to see us soon too. I continued forward without slowing down, chanting a spell as I went.

And sure enough, three men in black quickly came into view! Sherra wasn't with them, however. The tunnel ahead was blocked by a cave-in, and the three men were just standing in front of it. Had it separated kidnappers from kidnappee?

Luke and Mileena came to a halt, possibly on guard for magic attacks. But I decided to charge right on in. The guys in black must have been chanting spells in advance though, because when they saw

me coming, they let 'em fly!

“Flare Arrow!”

But I was one step ahead of them! I released the spell I'd been chanting in advance too—*Whoosh!* A gale kicked up around me, an amplified version of my typical wind barrier. Normally it was just enough to fly with or knock glancing spells off course, but amplified, it created a straight-up wall of wind that could stop the men's Flare Arrows with ease. With that job done, I dismissed the barrier and—

“Fireball!” Luke's voice rang out from behind me. A ball of light then flew over my shoulder, right at the men in black.

Whaaat?! A Fireball would certainly take these guys out, but didn't Luke realize I'd be caught in the blast?! Naturally, there was nowhere to hide in a mine shaft. And so...

Bwoosh! The ball of fire erupted, its swirling flames consuming the three men and licking their way toward me! But before they hit...

“Flare Seal!” Mileena incanted words of power, and the fire stopped short just before my eyes as if blocked by an invisible barrier. The tongues of flame were close enough to reach out and touch, but I didn't feel any heat.

Mileena had just saved my hide with a pretty high-level fire resistance spell. It was serious business, but because it took so long to recite, you rarely had a chance to use it in a real fight. It was interesting to see it used as part of a tag-team maneuver.

The swirling flames swiftly died down, and then... the four of us gasped. We'd all expected to see three collapsed men in black, but to our surprise, one was still standing tall amongst the clearing smoke.

Of course! When I'd charged, only two of them had unleashed Flare Arrows on me. The third must have had the presence of mind to cast some kind of resistance spell on himself. The fact that I didn't see the other two guys suggested that they were out of the picture. The explosion might've even sent them flying. It had also blown through the collapsed rock blocking the way, opening a path deeper into the mine.

“I can't believe you caught up to us so fast,” the surviving man in black growled angrily. I knew that voice... It was Zain! “I should have finished things with you long ago... but it ends here! This time, I'll really—”

“Gwaaaaah!” came a scream from down the shaft, cutting off Zain's villain blather.

“Galva?!” Zain whipped around, and without another glance at us, took off down the tunnel.

Galva... So that was Gal-whatshisname's full name, huh? The rest of us exchanged brief looks, but we didn't have much time to waste here.

“Come on! Let’s go!” I said, running after Zain.

“Raaaaaaaagh!” Galva’s screams echoed through the shaft unceasingly.

The sight that greeted us as we arrived on the scene stopped us all in our tracks. At the end of the shaft was a vast chamber, tall and wide enough to house a couple of small buildings. And at its center, set deep into the ground, was a black sword. It had a single-edged blade with a gentle curve, and a straight, unadorned handle. An almost overwhelming quantity of miasma was pouring out of it.

Galva had both hands wrapped around the hilt, his back arched and his throat bellowing agony. The crackling black plasma shooting from the sword was coursing through him, and next to him... stood Sherra, a thin smile on her face. Zain, who was just ahead of us, froze up at the sight.



“What in the world...?” Gourry breathed.

At this, Sherra finally looked over at us, as if snapping out of a trance. “Ah!” She must not have realized we were here. Her eyes momentarily went wide, and then a slightly troubled expression crossed her face. “Oh dear, you’re here already? And all of you together...” she said, scratching her cheek in a shockingly nonchalant fashion.

“Wh-What in the world are you...?” I asked.

Sherra winced in response. “I was hoping you’d come one at a time... Ah, but it is what it is.”

“H-Hey, Sherra! What’re you sayin’? What in the world is goin’ on here?!” Luke shouted.

I didn’t have a good sense of what was happening myself, but I was starting to get the feeling that our real enemy was actually Sherra.

She cast a loving glance at Galva—rather, at the black sword he was gripping—and said, “Well, I was hoping to run a few more tests... but this is fine enough. Dulgoffa, transform!”

Crackle! Responding to Sherra’s call, the plasma shooting from the sword suddenly grew in intensity. And then...

“Galva!” Zain let out an anguished cry.

Galva, bathed in the black plasma, began to change into a grotesque form. His flesh ruptured and swelled. Strange leg-like appendages sprouted from his body. He wasn’t screaming anymore. The only sounds to be heard were the crackling of the plasma, a bestial growl... and Sherra’s mad laughter.

Tha-thump! A pulse shot through Galva’s body, and it swelled a size larger.

Not good! “Run, everyone!” I shouted, instinctively realizing the danger.

Everyone snapped back to their senses at last, turned tail, and took off running back up the shaft. The growling and the laughter grew distant behind us, but rather than silence—*Rrr... rrr... rrrrrmb*—an eerie vibration overtook the air. This, too, was growing stronger and stronger. Were we gonna make it outta here?!

Rrrrrmb! The mountain itself was trembling.

The vibrations had escalated into full-blown tremors by the time the five of us made our mad dash to the exit. As you might guess, by “the five of us,” I meant me, Gourry, Luke, Mileena... and the man in black we’d picked up. Zain had been our enemy minutes ago, but now we had nothing to fight over.

Rrrrrrrrrmb! As the earthly tremors crescendoed to shake the very air around us, our newly-formed quintet flew out of the cave!

“Get clear! Hurry!”

Just as we got away from the cliff face and dove into the forest—*Cra-kash!* Bursting out of the mountain around its midpoint, a giant black figure appeared.

“Hraaaaaaagh!” The being that was formerly Galva howled up at the moon.

“What on earth...?” Mileena gasped, her voice hoarse with terror.

I was finally starting to get my head around what had happened. Of course, I was still missing some of the details, but...

I’d once heard that demidemons—lesser demons and brass demons—were basically low-ranking demons of the astral plane who’d entered our world by possessing sub-sentient animals, transforming their bodies and abilities in the process. The implication was that, since humans were sentient, it was impossible for such bottom-tier demons to possess and transform them.

But by extension... didn’t that mean a more powerful demon *could* do the job? The answer to that question appeared to be standing before us now in the form of a massive black lump of flesh the size of a dragon, held aloft on ten spidery legs.

“Hraaagh!” A cry halfway between rage and hatred echoed into the moonlit night, and the thing—the term “hyperdemon” seemed apt—began to move. Its destination? Bezeld.

“Not good! He’s headin’ for the city!” Luke shouted.

“Well, duh! Let’s stop him!” I responded in irritation.

I didn’t know how powerful this thing was, but it was pretty easy to imagine it was leagues stronger than any lesser or brass demon. If it cut loose on a city, its draconic size alone would stymie most of the damage the garrison’s non-magical swords and spears could dish out. That meant our only solution was to take it down before it got there!

I took the cue to jump to action and recite my spell of choice.

Thou who art darker than twilight

Thou who art redder than lifeblood

I swear in thy exalted name

Obscured, deep in the flow of time

And make this pledge to darkness here:

So all those in equal measure—

Fools that they are to block our path—

Shall face destruction unconstrained

Grant me power, and unleash thine!

“Is that...?!” Mileena exclaimed when she heard me chanting.

Yup, this was the attack spell that called upon Ruby-Eye Shabranigdu, ruler of all demons in this world—

“Dragon Slave!”

Kra-koouooooooooom! Responding to my words of power, a red light

coalesced near the hyperdemon and exploded! The smoke quickly cleared, and when it did...

"That thing's still standing?!" Luke shouted. Sure enough, the hyperdemon had survived a direct hit from a Dragon Slave.

"But it does seem to have taken some damage," Mileena said calmly, in contrast to Luke's panic.

Yup. Though I hadn't blown it to pieces, my spell had taken a chunk out of the mass of flesh that served as the hyperdemon's body. It seemed like its demonic power had managed to mitigate the Dragon Slave, but couldn't negate the spell entirely. In other words, it had survived that one, but I could just keep hammering it with Dragon Slaves until it was kaput.

Time for take two, then! But just as I began to chant, the hyperdemon slumped. *Hmm? Out of juice?* I had to wonder, but only for a second. I knew pretty immediately that it was pure wishful thinking. As the hyperdemon leaned... the chunk of flesh my Dragon Slave had taken out began to fill in before my eyes!

"Huh?!" I found myself rubbing my eyes, and by the time I looked again, the hyperdemon's wound was completely healed over.

"You're kiddin' me... You gotta be..." Luke's whisper was carried away by the wind.

The rest of us just stared blankly. The crater-sized hole gouged out by the explosion had healed in the blink of an eye. That kind of recovery speed would be absurd even for trolls, and they were the poster children of regenerative powers. The hyperdemon stood in place for some time, then resumed its course for Bezeld undeterred.

"So... what's the plan?" Gourry asked, scratching at his cheek.

I looked at him in bafflement. "The plan? I don't... have one."

I'd met creatures that I couldn't beat with a Dragon Slave before. Some that could even negate it completely. But... one that could instantly heal from its damage? This was a real first! It kind of felt like cheating, you know? How did that even work? Not even a powerful high-tier demon could spontaneously recover from a head-on Dragon Slave, yet this hyperdemon had just done the impossible and barely batted an eye.

Mileena was the first to collect herself. "Worry about that later. If nothing else, we need to slow it down," she said and took off running again, quickly followed by Luke.

"She's right, Gourry!" I called.

"Yeah!"

The four of us could still— Wait, there were supposed to be five of us. Where had Zain gone?!

Well, I guess from his point of view, his mission was just to get the sword. He was under no obligation to help us put down the hyperdemon,

but still... Oh well. Not like I was counting on him anyway.

For now, Mileena was right. We had to do whatever we could to hold the hyperdemon off while we thought ourselves up a plan! And so the four of us took off after the giant creature.

“Let’s go!” Gourry charged at the demon’s foot! “Hyah!”

Swsh! His silver blade glinted in the moonlight, cutting a glowing arc in the darkness. It cleanly cleaved one of the demon’s legs, which was about as wide as I was tall. The severed appendage began to slide apart on the diagonal slice...

Did he do it?! In spite of my momentary hopes, something like tentacles began to squirm from the upper and lower sections of the cut limb. They knitted together, and in an instant, the leg was back to normal! That regenerative process was honestly pretty gross when viewed up close... Kinda made me glad I hadn’t had a front-row seat for the post-Dragon Slave show.

The hyperdemon kept walking along at the same pace, not even seeming to notice the brief damage to the leg. We weren’t even slowing it down...

“It’s no use! I can cut through it, but...” Gourry fretted as he leaped back from the hyperdemon.

“What about *my* sword, then?!” Luke charged in next, his blade aglow. He released a blast of wind that sliced at the hyperdemon’s leg!

...

“Yeah, nothin’,” Luke said with an abashed smile, scratching at his head.

This guy...

“Freeze Arrow!” Mileena incanted. Her icy bolts scored direct hits on the demon’s legs but didn’t even seem to faze the monster. She was probably hoping she could take out all its appendages at the same time and slow it down, but this level of shamanistic magic clearly wasn’t going to do the trick.

Okay, my turn again! “Zellas Bullid!”

The beam of light I summoned scorched through two of the hyperdemon’s legs, which again healed instantly. *Hmm, so that won’t cut it either. Shall I try blowing off all its legs at once with a Dragon Slave?* I considered it—it would buy us some time, but that was it. I wished I could fire off a chain of big spells to annihilate the demon before it had time to regenerate, but it was healing faster than I could get through chants.

I also knew a spell even more destructive than the Dragon Slave, but I didn’t really want to use it...

Hey... wait a minute.

“Guys, I’m gonna go big! Stand back!” I called, then began an incantation. This one was a souped-up Dragon Slave courtesy of my

talismans' amplification! I honestly didn't know how powerful it would end up being, but I was hoping it was enough to vaporize the hyperdemon in one blast! I finished the long chant, and then... "Dragon Slave!"

Kra-kooooooooooooom! An even bigger explosion than before rocked the night air. Soon, the flames died down, and...

"Okay, that's progress!" I rejoiced when I spied the hyperdemon through the dissipating dust. The standard Dragon Slave had only been enough to bore a hole in its central mass, but this baby... It hadn't wiped the hyperdemon off the map completely, but it had incinerated about half of its body.

Except... Yup, there it goes again!

"Oh, c'mon!" I clutched my head in my hands as the creature regenerated once more. *How can something instantly heal from that kind of damage?!*

Still, there was something about the eerie regeneration ritual that was tickling the back of my mind. While I racked my brain trying to place it, the hyperdemon moved ever closer to Bezeld. As it approached, the sky over the city lit up. I instinctively looked that way to see countless small points of red light hovering over the edge of the city.

A moment later... they came rushing at the hyperdemon all at once!

"Flare Arrows?!" I cried. There were hundreds—no, thousands of them.

Brooooooshabooshaboosh! The fiery darts struck the monster with a great explosion.

"That's right! The garrison!" Gourry cried as he watched the scene unfold.

Indeed, there were quite a few soldiers and sorcerers stationed in Bezeld at the moment. After a huge monster erupted from the mountain and a certain someone started chucking Dragon Slaves around, there was no way they *hadn't* been on alert. They must have called all their sorcerers together to fire an organized volley of Flare Arrows at the giant creature closing in on the city.

But as we'd already established, spells of that level weren't going to work. The hyperdemon just continued its slow and steady march toward the town. Various other attack spells came flying intermittently from its walls, but most did nothing, and those that did deal damage were instantly healed from. Was there no way to beat this monstrosity?!

The hyperdemon was finally upon the city. Chaotic screams rang through the night-cloaked streets. Even as the sorcerers hit the

monster with all the spells they had, it continued unhindered. Of course, the soldiers didn't fare much better... And upon realizing that the garrison was virtually helpless against the hyperdemon, the townspeople fell into a total panic. The soldiers were shouting orders, perhaps to evacuate, but their voices were drowned out by the screams of the citizenry.

That was the state we found the city in when we used our flight spells to beat the hyperdemon to Bezeld.

Still, while it was all well and good that we'd managed to head the thing off, we hadn't yet come up with a plan. Another Dragon Slave wasn't going to be more effective just because I hit it from here. There had to be some way to beat this thing—I just didn't know what it was. There was something, *something* nagging at my brain... but the hyperdemon wasn't about to stand and wait while I figured it out.

The sorcerers' formation at the edge of town fell apart as the black giant loomed. The hyperdemon hadn't mounted a single attack, but its mere approach inspired terror.

"Stay strong! Hit it with all your attack spells! It's got to work!" a commander-type shouted, not very convincingly, to the cowering sorcerers. But just then...

Vwoosh! Something tore through the air and the commander let out a scream!

The sound of chanting paused like time stood still. A tentacle had lashed out from hyperdemon's fleshy core and pierced the commander's chest—armor and all—with a long, black talon mounted at the end.

Vvm. A shudder ran through his body. The blood instantaneously drained from his face, his cheeks now hollow. *Thrm.* His skin dried up and his hair fell out. The once-young commander was mummifying before our eyes. Yeah... almost like the tentacle had sucked the very life force out of him.

"Urk! Elemekia—" One of the nearby sorcerers was about to unleash a spell at the tentacle, when...

Fwip! Another tentacle, this one talon-less, appeared out of nowhere and ensnared the sorcerer! No, it wasn't just him... Countless dozens of tentacles lashed out simultaneously and snatched up the other casters around him too. Despite each one being only as thick as a child's wrist, they had to be incredibly strong. The tentacles carried their prey to the hyperdemon's core, and then...

Skwish! The fleshy mass shuddered, and grotesque, fanged, snake-like tendrils sprouted out of it to chomp down on the sorcerers and soldiers. Their deathly agonies echoed into the night. Unable to bear the gruesome sight, the sorcerers around me scrambled over each other to flee. But seeing this all for myself...

“That... That’s it!” I cried out when it hit me. I’d witnessed a similar phenomenon a while back in a city called Atlas.

Raugnut Rushavna was a curse usable only by demons that granted a terrible sort of immortality to its victim. Humans afflicted with it would be transformed into a clod of flesh racked with endless torment. There was no way out but death... except the afflicted couldn’t die through any normal means. The only way to stop their suffering was to destroy the demon responsible.

If this hyperdemon had been created by Raugnut Rushavna, that would explain its absurdly fast regeneration. But it also meant our only hope of defeating it was to find and annihilate the demon who’d cast the curse.

The screaming in the streets grew louder. The people’s resistance amounted to nothing, and at last, the hyperdemon breached Bezeld! Once inside the city, it finally began to reveal its tremendous power. Countless tentacles streaked out of the main body, indiscriminately snatching up nearby people and drawing them in to devour them. The monster’s attacks weren’t particularly overwhelming; its regenerative capacity was the real problem here. All this time, we’d been pressing the offensive...

“Blast Ash!”

Frrsh! The strike I unleashed turned the midsection of one tentacle extending from the hyperdemon’s body to black ash, but thinner tentacles sprang from both halves of the burned-through tentacle, knotted together, and reconnected the two.

Even its extremities have that kind of recovery power?! None of our attacks seemed to be effective in the slightest. On top of that, now that the creature was within the city limits, I couldn’t use big spells like the Dragon Slave. Not that they would’ve done much good either...

“Isn’t there anything we can do, Lina?!” Gourry asked.

“Anything at all?” I couldn’t help wincing. *If there was, I would have done it already...* Someone merely afflicted with Raugnut Rushavna wouldn’t turn into a rampaging giant like this, and your garden-variety demon wouldn’t have this crazy recovery ability. The trouble here was the fusion of the two—

W-Wait a minute...

“Everyone! Back me up!” I called, picking up a chant as I charged at the hyperdemon!

“Hey! Wait, Lina! Darn it...” Gourry clucked.

“Back you up? For what?!” Luke called.

Either sensing me coming or just continuing their onslaught, countless tentacles lashed out at me. My spell wasn’t ready yet, but...

“Rune Flare!”

“Hyah!”

“Rah!”

Mileena’s bolt of light pierced one of the tentacles, and Gourry and Luke cut through the others. And while they had all of the incoming tentacles disabled, I charged onward.

“Lina! You’re too close!” Gourry shouted.

I ignored him, natch! I had to find out if my hunch was right or not! The tentacles after me twisted and wriggled, but two or three of them moving at random wouldn’t be able to catch me. Even when two more shot my way, I figured I could handle ’em. I twisted at just the right time to dodge, and just then...

“Geh!”

Thmp! My leg was swept out from under me. I’d tripped over a tentacle that had either snuck up on me or stayed low to the ground to go unnoticed. I lost my balance and stumbled, and when I did—*Fwip!*—another of the tentacles grabbed my left arm!

“Lina!” Gourry shouted, slashing through the tentacle that had seized my arm.

It regenerated immediately, but the moment it lost its grip, I shook it off.

“What are you doing, Lina?!” Gourry asked, but I couldn’t afford to answer him now—I’d lose the spell I’d just finished chanting! I wasn’t ready to let it fly yet either!

The tentacles heading for us were increasing in number, if gradually. Gourry was defending me with his blade and Mileena was covering me with spells from behind, but I was hitting the limits of what I could dodge.

All of a sudden—*Vwee!*—something streaked toward me, weaving through the tentacles! *There it is!* This was what I’d been waiting for! I finally unleashed the spell I was holding on to!

“Ragna Blade!”

Vrummm! Borrowing the power of void itself, I produced a blade of darkness in my hands and parried the coming strike with all my might.

Ngeeeee! Was the very air around me straining, or was it a cry of rage? Whatever the case, the tremendous sound rocked my world as my dark blade clashed with one of the hyperdemon’s tentacles... More specifically, with the black claw at the end of it!

Whaaat?! My eyes went wide in shock. My blade could cut through most demons, even pretty darn high-level ones! Yet the hyperdemon’s black claw had blocked it!

Actually... my dark blade was digging into the black claw, but the claw was regenerating as fast as I cut it! *There’s no way to break through!* Desperation welled inside me. I couldn’t pump my spell’s output in this position, and the Ragna Blade rapidly sapped my magic

to fuel its high destructive power.

This is a battle of attrition. Sooner or later, my black blade will be extinguished and the claw will...

Just as I was imagining my own unfortunate end...

“Ruby-Eye Blade!” Luke shouted, and I caught a flash out of the corner of my eye. It was a sword... of red light!

Huh?!

Krk! My black blade and Luke’s ruby razor now had the hyperdemon’s claw pincerred! It could bear the pressure from both sides for only an instant, and then...

Zinnng! An ear-splitting peal rang out, and the claw snapped.

“Hraaaaaaaagh!” the hyperdemon cried its last.

“Hey! The demon...” I gasped.

“It’s collapsing?!” Gourry and Luke both shouted in shock.

Indeed, the hyperdemon capable even of regenerating from a Dragon Slave began to fall apart before our eyes.



The swarm of weakly writhing tentacles eventually dropped to the ground, turned to parched earth, and disintegrated. The legs supporting the body snapped, hitting the ground with a series of thunderous tremors. The body met the same fate. All that was left in the end was a large pile of dust, and the uncertain whispers of the townspeople around us.

“Hey, Lina. What the heck just happened?” Gourry asked after the hyperdemon’s body had crumbled without a trace. Luke and Mileena also stared at me in silence, their expressions asking the same question.

Hmm... where to start, though?

“As I’m sure you can imagine, that giant monster used to be the black cloak named Galva. A demonic curse transformed him,” I said after some thought. “But that wasn’t all. He was simultaneously possessed by a demon. That gave him both extreme regenerative abilities and extreme magic resistance. The only way to stop him was to destroy the demon who cast the curse, and while I was wondering where that demon might be, I thought... ‘You know, maybe it’s the same demon that possessed him.’”

“An’ what’s your basis for that?” Luke asked, sounding fed up.

“Well, it was pretty clear from what we saw in the cave that the black sword was what turned him into a demon. That suggested the demon who cast the curse on the guy, the demon that fused with him, and the black sword itself were all one and the same.”

“The sword was... a demon?” Luke said with a scowl.

I nodded firmly. “Pure demons are spiritual beings, so they can more or less take whatever form they want. Gourry and I have fought plenty with weird forms in the past. One was even a single demon manifested as a pair of floating orbs. So a demon taking the form of a sword to try to lure in treasure-seekers didn’t seem too far-fetched.” I hadn’t told Luke and Mileena, but the Sword of Light that Gourry once carried was apparently a high-ranking demon from another world as well. “Anyway, when I saw that hulking thing coming at us, I realized something. Out of all its tentacles, only one had a claw attached. That made me think it might be the core of the fused demon.”

“And... I guess you were right?” Luke asked.

I nodded again. “Yeah. Though if I’d been wrong, it would’ve been time to run for the hills. That’s basically it. You following all this, Gourry?”

“Nope.”

Argh.

“But we beat it, and that’s what matters, right?”

Why did you ask for an explanation then?! I managed to recover my

cool, then turned to Luke. "But hey, you did a pretty good job back there. Using the power of Ruby-Eye to summon a red sword of pure magic power... I've never seen a spell like that before."

"Indeed, I haven't either," came a voice from some distance away.

The four of us whipped around at once. A small, porcelain hand was reaching into the dust that had once been the hyperdemon's body. It reemerged holding the hilt of the black sword from the mine.

"You!" Luke shouted angrily when he saw the figure responsible.

"Yes, yes, congratulations on your achievement. I never expected to get the better of Lina Inverse easily, but I'll admit I was surprised by your competence as well, Master Luke," Sherra said with a bright smile, playing with the sword hilt in one hand. She was no longer dressed like your average townspeople. Instead, she now donned a costume like a high priest's vestments, modified for ease of movement. But unlike typical priest garb, her robes were jet black. They were also adorned with patches of silver embroidery that was either purely decorative or writing in some unknown language—I wasn't sure.

"You were behind all of this. The sword, the demons..." I muttered.

"Precisely," Sherra replied cheerfully. "I started the rumors about the sword as well. Dear old Glen, that silly old man... He was incredibly useful to me. I let him think I was his daughter, which allowed me to make that place my center of operations. He even spread rumors of the sword for me too."

"I see... That's why you didn't need money to live on. But no one believed the ramblings of a drunk old man. So you got impatient and started generating large numbers of demidemons..."

"Bingo. Then the rumors spread far and wide. Still, I never expected the great Lina Inverse to get involved."

"Hey... you know what Sherra really is?" Luke asked.

"I think I have an idea," I responded.

"Don't worry, my dear Mistress Lina. I'll introduce myself," Sherra said with an almost sarcastic bow, cutting me off. "It's exactly as she suspects. My true name is indeed Sherra. I was born in the Kataart Mountains." Her smile widened. "It might not be obvious at a glance, but I am a full-fledged demon."

"What?!" Luke and Mileena cried out in unison, understandably shocked by this declaration.

"So, what exactly is your big plan?" I asked her. "Judging by what you said earlier, you wanted to split us up and lure us to the sword one at a time. Slipping out of the inn at night, wandering off, and letting yourself get captured by the men in black was a ploy to split us up, wasn't it? I can't believe you thought that would work."

"O-Oh, shut up! I never thought you'd reach the mine so quickly!"

“I don’t think your final goal was creating that hyperdemon either. If we take what you said to its logical conclusion... it seems like we caught you with your pants down, and you demonified Galva in a fit of pique, yeah?”

“I told you to shut up!” The sheer irritation in her voice suggested I’d hit the nail on the head. Either her plan had gotten busted, or she just had a short fuse...

“Well, I don’t know what you were plotting, but now that the sword is broken, I guess it’s all up in smoke,” I said with a shrug.

At this, a grin appeared on Sherra’s face. “Is it, though? This sword is a demon I’ve created, and it’s also my weapon. Therefore...”

She gave the hilt a light swing, and then... a new black blade sprouted from the guard!

“What?!” we all cried out in unison.

“...I can do this with it,” she said, and took a practiced fighting stance.

But even if it was with the assistance of a Raugnut Rushavna curse, she’d produced a demon capable of blocking my Ragna Blade... which meant...

“Sherra... you’re not just any demon, are you?” I asked.

A beaming smile crossed her face. “Indeed. Perhaps introducing myself this way would make it clearest... I am Sherra, General of the Dynast.”

“What?!” Her words took my breath away. *The General of the Dynast?!*

“The what?” Luke asked.

“A high-ranked demon in service to Dynast, one of the five servants of Dark Lord Ruby-Eye Shabranigdu,” I managed to explain.



I had once met the Priest and General of the Dragon, servants to Chaos Dragon Gaav—a peer of Dynast's. I also happened to know Greater Beast's Priest. I won't mince words here; beings like them were absurdly strong. If Sherra, General of the Dynast, was on the same level... then even with a four-on-one advantage, we stood little to no chance of winning. Even if we decided to make a break for it, escape seemed unlikely.

And that meant... we'd just have to get *her* to withdraw!

"I can't believe it," I said, dramatically pointing at Sherra.

"What? The way I tricked you, you mean? Or how I crushed this pathetic little city? Or was it something more silly and sentimental, like how I turned that man into a demon?" She spoke with a confident smile, fully assured of her own superiority.

But I wasn't rattled in the slightest. "None of all that. I can't believe... Dynast Graushera named his subordinate *Sherra*?! That kind of cheap naming scheme is absolutely appalling!"

Krrrrk! At my words, Sherra froze up completely.

"What? Don't... Don't be ridiculous! Lord Dynast gave me this name himself! It... It must have a noble lineage!"

Oho? She seems a bit shaken by that. Let's keep poking! "Don't tell me, Sherra... Is your counterpart—you know, the Priest of the Dynast—named Grau or Glao or something like that?"

I saw her face twitch, and then she completely froze up. *Wait... you're kidding me. Is that really the Priest's name? What's your damage, Dynast?!*

"R-Regardless! It may sound silly to humans like you, but Lord Dynast surely gave it a great deal of thought! Surely..."

"You don't sound so sure. Why don't you go ask Dynast about it? I bet he'll start laughing and say, 'I didn't have a lot of ideas, so I just named you the first thing that came to mind. Hahaha.'"

"H-He would never! I'm sure it's an ancient and noble name!"

"And you know this... how?"

"Ngh!" In obvious frustration, Sherra gritted her teeth and pointed her sword at me. "Very well... This isn't over! I shall depart for now, but the next time we meet, I'll know the origin of my name!"

Not the greatest parting line I'd ever heard, but hey. Sherra then blinked into the darkness and was gone.

Hoo boy... There she goes.

"Well... pure demons are spiritual beings, so I guess they're weak to psychological warfare..." I whispered.

"That's how demons work, huh?" Luke asked, eyes narrowed.

Epilogue

“Well, take care.” Gourry and I said our goodbyes to Luke and Mileena the next day.

“Guess we both ended up empty-handed,” Luke said with a strained smile. “But lemme tell you somethin’, okay? If we end up in another fight with you somewhere, someday, over some treasure, we ain’t holdin’ back.”

“Noted.”

“Well... take care an’ all yerselves.”

“Don’t do anything to drive Mileena off, you hear?”

“H-Hey! Shut up!” Luke’s face turned bright red at my comment, and he swiftly turned his back on me. “A-Anyway... So long for now! Let’s go, Mileena!”

“Farewell.” She cast me a small smile, and began following after Luke.

“Sheesh... At least things have calmed down a bit,” Gourry said—a line that was positively braindead in its casualness—around the time the departing couple were about the size of ants to our eyes.

“Hahh...” I let out a deep sigh. “Tell me, Gourry. How exactly have things ‘calmed down a bit?’”

“Huh?” Gourry gazed into the distance for a while, thinking, then said, “Now that you mention it... I guess we haven’t resolved much of anything, huh?”

“Precisely. We made a demon go splat, then scared Sherra off... But we never actually learned who those men in black were. That Zain guy disappeared on us too, and we didn’t even get a sword out of it all. Still, there’s one thing that’s really weighing on me: what was Sherra after? Her intelligence and personality notwithstanding, I’m concerned that a General’s mixed up in all this... And for some reason, she’s taking the form of a human girl to run her little scheme. I’m not sure exactly what said scheme is, but I suspect Hellmaster’s death has something to do with it.”

“Huh.”

Don’t just say “huh”! This lug still didn’t understand what was going on here... Granted, I couldn’t really speak with too much authority on it either. There were still too many unanswered questions. There was only one thing I could say for sure—the demons were mounting a comeback after Hellmaster’s demise. If we weren’t

careful, we might see an all-out war between the humans and the demons.

That was what my gut told me as I gazed up into the clear blue sky.

Afterword

Scene: The Author and L

Au: Welcome back to the reprints! This volume starts our second major arc, which has a slightly different flavor to it. But thinking back on it, writing *The Mystic Sword of Bezeld* was kind of... eventful.

L: Oh? How so?

Au: Like, I got halfway through it and my computer's hard drive got wiped.

L: Bwuh?! That's... That's...

Au: Yeah. It was... a long time ago. The world was all abuzz with news of the A*m incident. I was glued to the TV set and couldn't get any writing done, so I had to call my editor and say, "Lock me in, please."

L: You volunteered for that?

Au: Yes. Personally. It was my first ever lock-in!

L: That's where the editor stands behind you the whole time, looking at their watch and clicking their tongue in irritation, right?

Au: Of course not! That's creepy! What editor would do that? It just seems spiteful! They got me a room in a short-term rental, said, "Okay, this is your apartment. Get to it," and left the rest to me.

L: Wow. In TV shows, you get the whole editor-standing-behind-you deal... I'm disappointed it wasn't that kind of lock-in.

Au: I'm not sure what kind of lock-in *that* is, but... I'm sure every author-editor duo does things a little differently. And it's not like an editor can afford to hover over a single author all day. And while I suspect that having someone standing leering over their shoulder would encourage some writers, it might cause others to freeze up completely.

So despite the fact that it was the A*m news that was distracting me, my editor got me a short-term rental at K*m**do in Tokyo, known for its ramen shops—and the A*m headquarters?! That's what I was thinking about when I started my lockdown, and then when I was about halfway through the draft...

L: It went poof?

Au: Yep. Hard drive went poof. And I had no backup.

L: Wow... So did you think, "Maybe I should just make the whole thing an afterword"?

Au: Of course not. I contacted the editorial department, and

fortunately someone who knew a lot about computers was able to restore the data. Incidentally, that same person would become my third editor.

L: Ah, so you recovered it in the end. Did you write the whole draft in Tokyo?

Au: No, I stopped halfway and came back to Osaka.

L: Coward! Why bother locking down if you were just going to call it off and go home?!

Au: Heh. You misunderstand. That was just the end of my lock-in *in Tokyo*! When you live alone, see, you have to go home once a week to check the mail and stuff. But going home to Osaka once a week was a huge drain on my time and my stamina. It was inefficient. And so, I returned to Osaka and began my second lockdown in a hotel room there!

L: You paid for it yourself?

Au: Yes! Obviously it was a work expense, but I paid for it out of pocket. The hotel had a pretty interesting system. You paid a fee up front, and then you settled your bill at checkout. There was a channel on the in-room TV where you could see how much money you'd already paid and the funds you had remaining. It would tick down every morning, and every time you ordered room service!

L: That seems kind of... stressful.

Au: Watching the number go down like that does make you feel weirdly trapped. But after I finished the draft, I realized that I'd spent nearly a month's rent on one week at a hotel!

L: Well, renting an apartment would include a security deposit and such, so there's more to it. But really, rather than reminiscing about the start of the second major novel arc, you just wanted to talk about locking down?

Au: Well, I just can't separate this volume from my memories of writing it in lockdown. Besides, this might be educational for any readers who're looking at doing a lock-in themselves in the future!

L: Seriously? Normal people never have to do that! And even if they do become writers, they should just turn in their drafts by the deadline so there's no need to bunker down for a lock-in.

Au: Blergh!

L: Hey, he just coughed up blood.

Au: You... You just made enemies of two thousand manga artists and novelists in Japan...

L: Lots of people in lockdown, eh? Now, all silliness aside, there'll be a little bit of a break before we put out the reprints of volume 10, but we'll see you... in the afterword there!

Au: Yes, see you then.

L: Later, fellas!

Afterword: Over.

Slayers 9

THE MYSTIC SWORD OF BEZELD



"Who are you people?!"
"You think we're stupid enough
to give our names to the sketchiest
guy in the universe?"



We hurried after them!
Our destination: Bezeld!





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by Hajime Kanzaka

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